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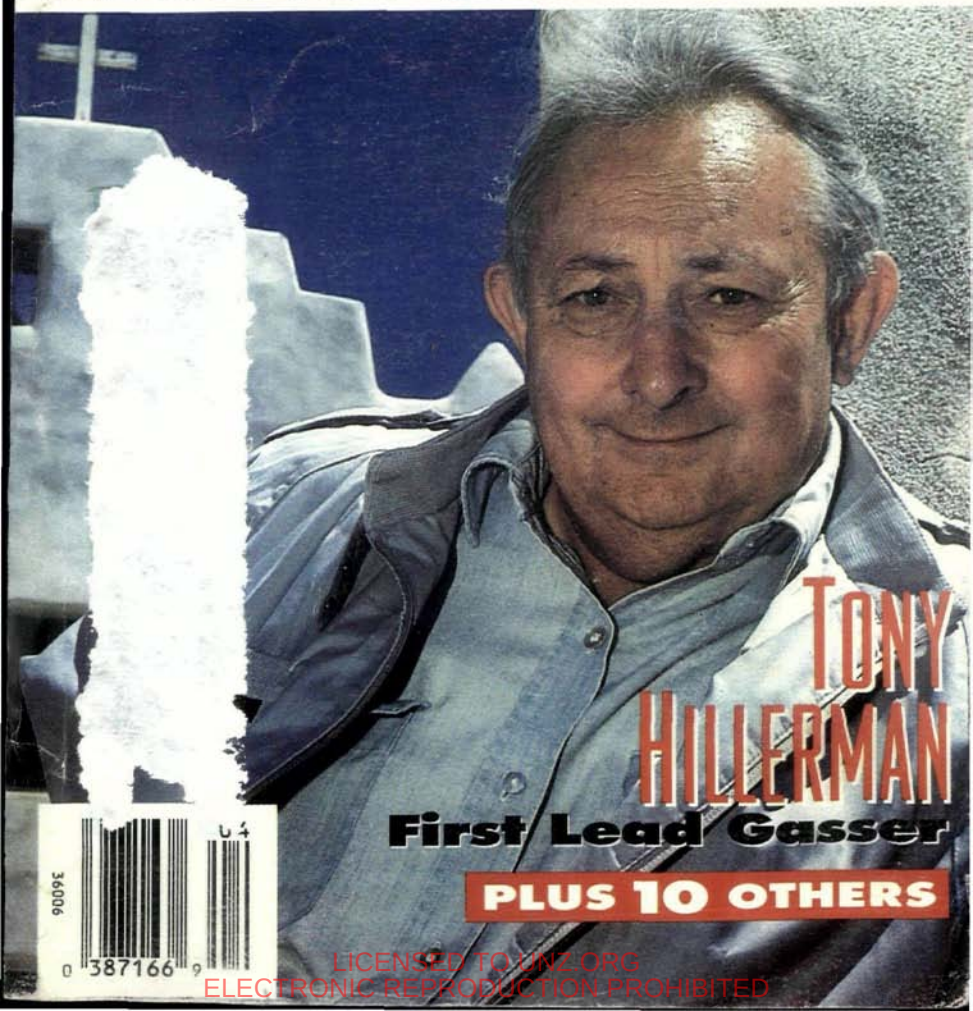

TONY HILLERMAN

First Lead Gasser

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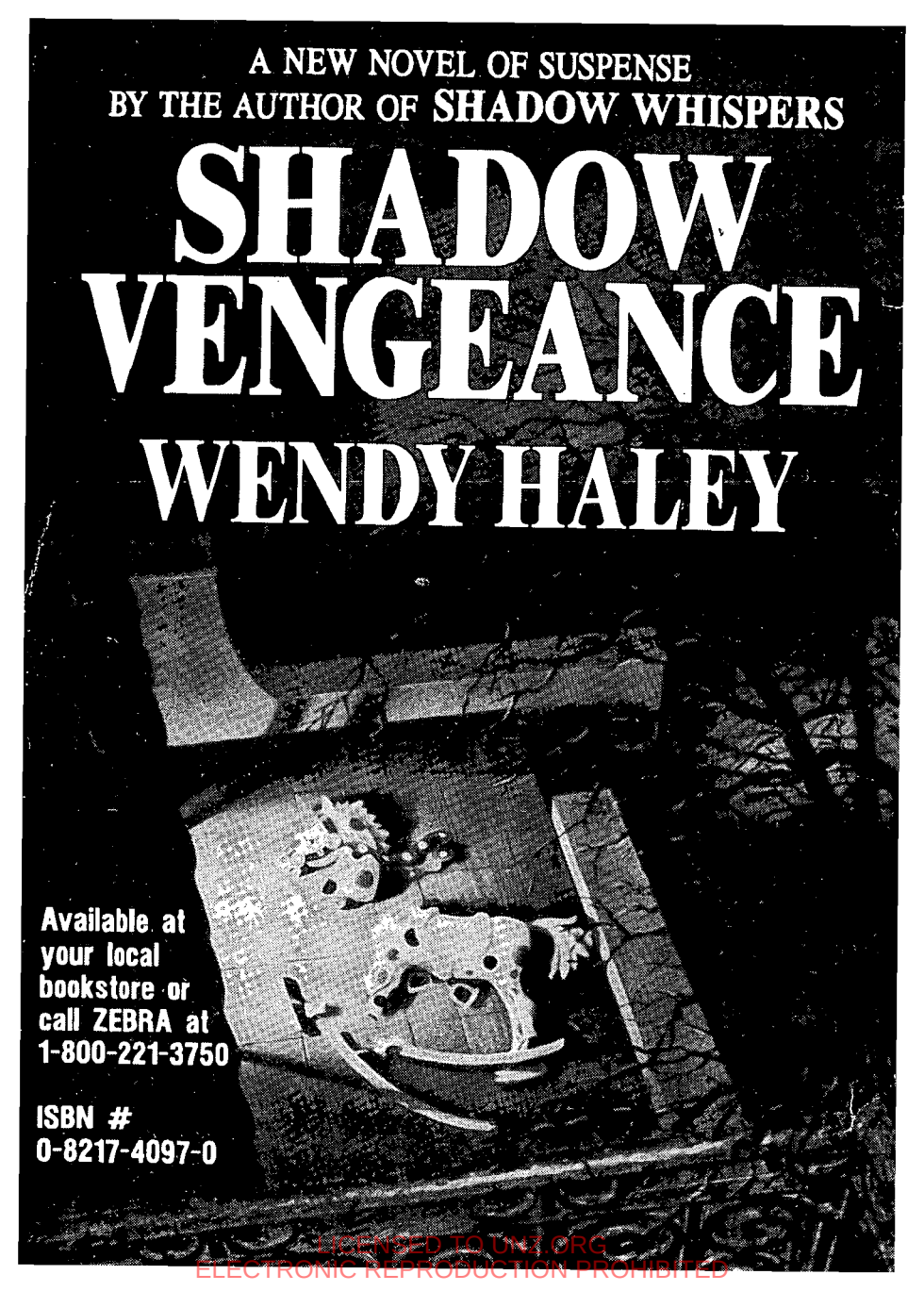

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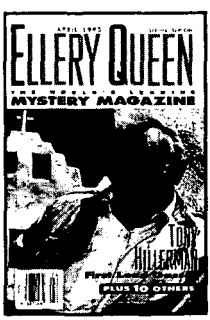

On our cover is TONY HILLERMAN
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a *NEW* short story by

TONY HILLERMAN

In 1965 Truman Capote broke new ground with the publication of In Cold Blood, *a book he described as a nonfiction novel—a "novel" because he allowed himself some of the fiction writer's license in getting inside the mind of his subject, and in sometimes giving an account of things a reporter could not possibly know; "nonfiction" because it was based on real events and aimed to bring these events to the reader in a spirit faithful to the facts. Tony Hillerman has done essentially the same thing here with this profoundly moving nonfiction short story, at the conclusion of which he offers some comments of his own . . .*

FIRST LEAD GASSER

by TONY HILLERMAN

John Hardin walked into the bureau, glanced at the wall clock (which told him it was 12:22 A.M.), laid his overcoat over a chair, flicked the switch on the teletype to "ON," tapped on the button marked "BELL," and then punched on the keys with a stiff forefinger . . .

ALBUQUERQUE . . .
YOU TURNED ON? . . .
SANTA FE

He leaned heavily on the casing of the machine, waiting, feeling the coolness under his palms, noticing the glass panel was dusty and hearing the words again and that high, soft voice. Then the teletype bumped tentatively and said:

SANTA FE . . .
AYE AYE GO WITH IT . . .
ALBUQUERQUE

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And John Hardin punched:

A L B U Q U E R Q U E . . . WILL FILE LEAD SUBBING OUT GASSER ITEM IN MINUTE. PLEASE SEND SCHEDULE FOR 300 WORDS TO DENVER . . . S A N T A F E . . .

The teletype was silent as Hardin removed the cover from the typewriter (dropping it to the floor). Then the teletype carriage bumped twice and said:

S A N T A F E . . . NO RUSH DENVER UNTHINKS GASSER WORTH FILING ON NATIONAL TRUNK DIXIE TORNADOES JAMMING WIRE AND HAVE DANDY HOTEL FIRE AT CHICAGO FOLKS OUTJUMPING WINDOWS ETC HOWEVER STATE OVERNIGHT FILE LUKS LIKE HOTBED OF TRANQUILITY CAN USE LOTS OF GORY DETAILS THERE. . . . A L B U Q U E R Q U E

Their footsteps had echoed down the long concrete tube, passed the dark barred mouths of cell blocks, and Thompson had said, "Is it always this goddam quiet?" and the warden said, "The cons are always quiet on one of these nights."

Hardin sighed and said something under his breath and punched . . .

A L B U Q U E R Q U E . . . REMIND DENVER NITESIDE THAT DENVER DAYSIDE HAS REQUEST FOR 300 WORDS TO BE FILED FOR OHIO PM POINTS . . . S F

He turned his back on the machine, put a carbon book in the typewriter, hit the carriage return twice, and stared at the clock, which now reported the time to be 12:26. While he stared, the second hand made the laborious climb toward 12 and something clicked and the clock said it was 12:27.

Hardin started typing, rapidly . . .

First Lead Gasser

Santa Fe, N.M., March 28—(UPI)—George Tobias Small, 38, slayer of a young Ohio couple who sought to befriend him, died a minute after midnight today in the gas chamber at the New Mexico State Penitentiary.

He examined the paragraph, pulled the paper from the typewriter and dropped it. It slid from the top of the desk and planed to the floor,

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spilling its carbon insert. On a fresh carbon book Hardin typed . . .

First Lead Gasser

Santa Fe, N.M., March 28—(UPI)—George Tobias Small, 38, who clubbed to death two young Ohio newlyweds last July 4, paid for his crime with his life early today in the New Mexico State Penitentiary gas chamber.

The hulking killer smiled nervously at execution witnesses as three guards pushed three unmarked buttons, one of which dropped cyanide pills into a container of acid under the chair in which he was strapped.

Hulking? Maybe tall, stooped killer; maybe gangling. Not really nervously. Better timidly; smiled timidly. But actually it was an embarrassed smile. Shy. Stepping from the elevator into that too-bright basement room, Small had blinked against the glare and squinted at them lined by the railing—the press corp and the official creeps in the role of "official witnesses." He looked surprised and then embarrassed and looked away, then down at his feet, and the warden had one hand on his arm. The two of them walking fast toward the front of the chamber, hurrying, while a guard held the steel door open. Above their heads cell block eight was utterly silent.

Hardin hit the carriage return.

The end came quickly for Small. He appeared to hold his breath for a moment and then breathed deeply of the deadly fumes. His head fell forward and his body slumped in death.

The room had been hot. Stuffy. Smelling of cleaning fluid. But under his hand, the steel railing was cold. "Looks like a big incinerator," Thompson said. "Or like one of those old wood stoves with the chimney out the top." And the man from the *Albuquerque Journal* said, "The cons call it the space capsule. Wonder why they put windows in it. There's not much to see." And Thompson said, with a sort of laugh, that it was the world's longest view. Then it was quiet. Father McKibbon had looked at them a long time when they came in, unsmiling, studying them. Then he had stood stiffly by the open hatch, looking at the floor.

Small, who said he had come to New Mexico from Colorado in search of work, was sentenced to death last November after a district court jury at Raton found him guilty of murder in

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the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Robert M. Martin of Cleveland. The couple had been married only two days earlier and was en route to California on a honeymoon trip.

You could see Father McKibbon saying something to Small—talking rapidly—and Small nodded and then nodded again, and then the warden said something and Small looked up and licked his lips. Then he stepped through the hatch. He tripped on the sill, but McKibbon caught his arm and helped him sit in the little chair, and Small looked up at the priest. And smiled. How would you describe it? Shy, maybe, or grateful. Or maybe sick. Then the guard was reaching in, doing something out of sight. Buckling the straps probably, buckling leather around a warm ankle and a warm forearm which had MOTHER tattooed on it, inside a heart.

Small has served two previous prison terms. He had compiled a police record beginning with a Utah car theft when he was fifteen. Arresting officers testified that he confessed killing the two with a jack handle after Martin resisted Small's attempt at robbery. They said Small admitted flagging down the couple's car after raising the hood on his old-model truck to give the impression he was having trouble.

Should it be flagging down or just flagging? The wall clock inhaled electricity above Hardin's head with a brief buzzing sigh and said 12:32. How long had Small been dead now? Thirty minutes, probably, if cyanide worked as fast as they said. And how long had it been since yesterday, when he had stood outside Small's cell in death row? It was late afternoon, then. You could see the sunlight far down the corridor, slanting in and striped by the bars. Small had said, "How much time have I got left?" and Thompson looked at his watch and said, "Four-fifteen from midnight leaves seven hours and forty-five minutes," and Small's bony hands clenched and unclenched on the bars. Then he said, "Seven hours and forty-five minutes now," and Thompson said, "Well, my watch might be off a little."

Behind Hardin the teletype said ding, ding, ding dingding.

S A N T A F E . . . DENVER NOW SEZ WILL CALL IN 300 FOR OHIO PM WIRE SHORTLY. HOW BOUT LEADING SAD SLAYER

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SAMMY SMALL TODAY GRIMLY GULPED GAS. OR SOME SUCH???? . . . A L B U Q U E R Q U E

The teletype lapsed into expectant silence, its electric motor purring. Outside a car drove by with a rush of sound.

Hardin typed:

Small refuted the confession at his trial. He claimed that after Martin stopped to assist him the two men argued and that Martin struck him. He said he then "blacked out" and could remember nothing more of the incident. Small was arrested when two state policemen who happened by stopped to investigate the parked vehicles.

"The warden told me you was the two that work for the outfits that put things in the papers all over and I thought maybe you could put something in about finding . . . about maybe . . . something about needing to know where my mother is. You know, so they can get the word to her." He walked back to his bunk, back into the darkness, and sat down and then got up again and walked back to the barred door, three steps. "It's about getting buried. I need someplace for that." And Thompson said, "What's her name?" and Small looked down at the floor. "That's part of the trouble. You see, this man she was living with when we were there in Salt Lake, well, she and him . . ."

Arresting officers and other witnesses testified there was nothing mechanically wrong with Small's truck, that there was no mark on Small to indicate he had been struck by Martin, and that Martin had been slain by repeated blows on the back of his head.

Small was standing by the bars now, gripping them so that the stub showed where the end of his ring finger had been cut off. Flexing his hands, talking fast. "The warden, well, he told me they'd send me wherever I said after it's over, back home, he said. They'd pay for it. But I won't know where to tell them unless somebody can find Mama. There was a place we stayed for a long time before we went to San Diego, and I went to school there some but I don't remember the name of it, and then we moved someplace up the coast where they grow figs and like that, and then I think it was Oregon

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next, and then I believe it was we moved on out to Salt Lake." Small stopped talking then, and let his hands rest while he looked at them, at Thompson and him, and said, "But I bet Mama would remember where I'm supposed to go."

Mrs. Martin's body was found in a field about forty yards from the highway. Officers said the pretty bride had apparently attempted to flee, had tripped and injured an ankle, and had then been beaten to death by Small.

Subject: George Tobias Small, alias Toby Small, alias G. T. Small. White male, about 38 (birth date, place unknown); weight, 188, height, 6'4"; eyes, brown; complexion, ruddy; distinguishing characteristics: noticeable stoop, carries right shoulder higher than left. Last two joints missing from left ring finger, deep scar on left upper lip, tattoo of heart with word MOTHER on inner right forearm.

Charge—Violation Section 12-2 (3) Criminal Code.
Disposition—Guilty of Murder, Colfax County District Court.
Sentence—Death.
Previous Record: July 28, 1941, sentenced Utah State Reformatory, car theft. April 7, 1943, returned Utah State Reformatory, B&E and parole violation. February 14, 1945, B&E, Resisting Arrest. Classified juvenile incorrigible. August 3, 1949, armed robbery, 5-7 years at . . .

Small had been in trouble with the law since boyhood, starting his career with a car theft at twelve, and then violating reformatory parole with a burglary. Before his twenty-first birthday he was serving the first of three prison terms.

Small had rested his hands on the brace between the bars but they wouldn't rest. The fingers twisted tirelessly among themselves. Blind snakes, even the stub of the missing finger moving restlessly. "Rock fell on it when I was little. Think it was that. The warden said he sent the word around about Mama but I guess nobody found her yet. Put it down that she might be living in Los Angeles. That man with us there in Salt Lake, he wanted to go out to the coast and maybe that's where they went."

It was then Thompson stopped him. "Wait a minute," Thompson said. "Where was she from, your mother? Why not . . ."

"I don't remember that," Small said. He was looking down at the floor.

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And Thompson asked, "Didn't she tell you?" and Small said, still not looking at us, "Sure, but I was little."

"You don't remember the town, or anything? How little were you?" And Small sort of laughed and said, "Just exactly twelve," and laughed again, and said, "That's why I thought maybe I could come home, it was my birthday. We was living in a house trailer then, and Mama's man had been drinking. Her too. When he did that, he'd whip me and run me off. So I'd been staying with a boy I knew there at school, in the garage, but his folks said I couldn't stay anymore and it was my birthday, so I thought I'd go by, maybe it would be all right."

Small had taken his hands off the bars then. He walked back to the bunk and sat down. And when he started talking again it was almost too low to hear it all.

"They was gone. The trailer was gone. The man at the office said they'd just took off in the night. Owed him rent, I guess," Small said. He was quiet again.

Thompson said, "Well," and then he cleared his throat, said, "Leave you a note or anything?"

And Small said, "No, sir. No note."

"That's when you stole the car, I guess," Thompson said. "The car theft you went to the reformatory for."

"Yes, sir," Small said. "I thought I'd go to California and find her. I thought she was going to Los Angeles, but I never knowed no place to write. You could write all the letters you wanted there at the reformatory, but I never knowed the place to send it to."

Thompson said, "Oh," and Small got up and came up to the bars and grabbed them.

"How much time have I got now?"

Small stepped through the oval hatch in the front of the gas chamber at two minutes before midnight and the steel door was sealed behind him to prevent seepage of the deadly gas. The prison doctor said the first whiff of the cyanide fumes would render a human unconscious almost instantly.

"We believe Mr. Small's death will be almost painless," he said.

"The warden said they can keep my body a couple days but then they'll just have to go on ahead and bury me here at the pen unless

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somebody claims it. They don't have no place cold to keep it from spoiling on 'em. Anyway, I think a man oughta be put down around his kin if he has any. That's the way I feel about it."

And Thompson started to say something and cleared his throat and said, "How does it feel to, I mean, about tonight?" and Small's hands tightened on the bars. "Oh, I won't say I'm not scared. I never said that but they say it don't hurt but I been hurt before, cut and all, and I never been scared of that so much."

Small's words stopped coming and then they came loud, and the guard reading at the door in the corridor looked around and then back at his book. "It's the not knowing," he said, and his hands disappeared from the bars and he walked back to the dark end of the cell and sat on the bunk and got up again and walked and said, "Oh God, it's not knowing."

Small cooperated with his executioners. While the eight witnesses required by law watched, the slayer appeared to be helping a guard attach the straps which held his legs in place in the gas chamber. He leaned back while his forearms were strapped to the chair.

The clock clicked and sighed and the minute hand pointed at the eight partly hidden behind a tear-shaped dribble of paint on the glass, and the teletype, stirred by this, said ding, ding, ding.

S A N T A F E . . . DENVER WILL INCALL GASSER AFTER SPORTS ROUNDUP NOW MOVING. YOU BOUT GOT SMALL WRAPPED UP? . . . A L B U Q U E R Q U E

Hardin pulled the carbon book from the typewriter and marked out "down" after the verb "flagging." He penciled a line through "give the impression he was" and wrote in "simulate." He clipped the copy to the holder above the teletype keyboard, folding it to prevent obscuring the glass panel, and switched the key from "KEYBOARD" to "TAPE" and began punching. The thin yellow strip, lacy with perforations, looped downward toward the floor and built rapidly there into a loopy pile.

He had seen Small wiping the back of his hand across his face. When he came back to the bars he had looked away.

"The padre's been talking to me about it every morning," Small had said. "That's Father McKibbon. He told me a lot I never knew

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before, mostly about Jesus, and I'd heard about that of course. It was back when I was in that place at Logan, that chaplain there, he talked about Jesus some, and I remembered some of it. But that one there at Logan, he talked mostly about sin and about hell and things like that and this McKibbon, the padre here, well, he talked different." And Small's hands had been busy on the bars again and then Small had looked directly at him, directly into his face, and then at Thompson. He remembered the tense heavy face, sweaty, and the words and the voice too soft and high for the size of the man.

"I wanted to ask you to do what you could about finding my mama. I looked for her all the time. When they'd turn me loose, I'd hunt for her. But maybe you could find her. With the newspapers and all. And I want to hear what you think about it all," Small said. "About what happens to me after they take me out of that gas chamber. I wanted to see what you say about that." And then Small said into the long silence: "Well, whatever it's going to be, it won't be any worse than it's been." And he paused again, and looked back into the cell as if he expected to see someone there, and then back at us.

"But when I walk around in here and my foot hits the floor I feel it, you know, and I think that's Toby Small I'm feeling there with his foot on the cement. It's Me. And I guess that don't sound like much, but after tonight I guess there won't be that for one thing. And I hope there's somebody there waiting for me. I hope there's not just me." And he sat down on the bunk.

"I was wondering what you thought about this Jesus and what McKibbon has been telling me." He had his head between his hands now, looking at the floor, and it made his voice muffled. "You reckon he was lying about it? I don't see any cause for it, but how can a man know all that and be sure about it?"

The clatter of the transmission box joined the chatter of the perforator. Hardin marked his place in the copy and leaned over to fish a cigarette out of his overcoat. He lit it, took it out of his mouth, and turned back to the keyboard. Above him, above the duet chatter of tape and keyboard, he heard the clock strike again, and click, and when he looked up it was 12:46.

McKibbon had his hand on Small's elbow, crushing the pressed prison jacket, talking to him, his face fierce and intent. And Small was listening, intent. Then he nodded and nodded again and when he stepped through the hatch he bumped his head on the steel hard

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enough so you could hear it back at the railing, and then Hardin could see his face through the round glass and it looked numb and pained.

McKibbon had stepped back, and while the guard was working with the straps, he began reading from a book. Loud, wanting Small to hear. Maybe wanting all of them to hear.

"Have mercy on me, O Lord; for unto Thee have I cried all the day, for Thou, O Lord, art sweet and mild: and plenteous in mercy unto all that call upon Thee. Incline thine ear, O Lord, and hear me: for I am needy and poor. Preserve my soul, for I am holy: O my God, save Thy servant that trusteth in Thee."

The pile of tape on the floor diminished and the final single loop climbed toward the stop bar and the machine was silent. Hardin looked through the dusty glass, reading the last paragraph for errors.

There was his face, there through the round window, and his brown eyes unnaturally wide, looking at something or looking for something. And then the pump made a sucking noise and the warden came over and said, "Well, I guess we can all go home now."

He switched the machine back from "TAPE" to "KEYBOARD" and punched . . .

SMALL'S BODY WILL BE HELD UNTIL THURSDAY, THE WARDEN SAID, IN THE EVENT THE SLAYER'S MOTHER CAN BE LOCATED TO CLAIM IT. IF NOT, IT WILL BE BURIED IN THE PRISON LOT. . . .

He switched off the machine. And in the room the only sound was the clock, which was buzzing again, and saying it was 12:49.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Whatever the merits of "First Lead Gasser" as a short story, it is important to me. The incident it concerns happened (with "only the names changed to protect the innocent") and it caused me to think seriously for the first time about writing fiction. The Thompson of the short story was the late John Curtis

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of the Associated Press. I was Hardin, then New Mexico manager of the now defunct United Press. Toby Small, under another name but guilty of the same crime, did in fact inhale cyanide fumes at midnight in the basement gas chamber of the New Mexico State Prison. Thus "First Lead Gasser" is more or less autobiographical. That alone is scant reason to present it to a magazine whose readers have come to expect mystery short stories.

What makes it important to me, and perhaps of some interest to you, are two facts. First, my inability to deal with the "truth" of the Toby Small tragedy in the three hundred words allotted me by journalism stuck in my mind. How could one report the true meaning of that execution while sticking to objective facts? I played with it, and a sort of nonfiction short story evolved. Second, Toby Small's hands on the bars, Toby Small's shy smile through the gas chamber window, and the story Toby Small told Curtis and me became part of those memories a reporter can't shake.

Those of you who have read *People of Darkness* met Toby Small under the name of Colton Wolf, reincarnated as he might have evolved if fate had allowed him to live a few murders longer. The plot required a professional hit man. Since it seems incredible to me that anyone would kill for hire, I was finding it hard to conceive the character. Then the old memory of Small's yearning for his mother came to my rescue. I think I did a better job of communicating the tragedy of Small in the book than in the short story. A quarter century of additional practice should teach one something. But I'm still not skilled enough to do justice to that sad afternoon listening to a damaged man wondering what he would find when he came out of the gas chamber.

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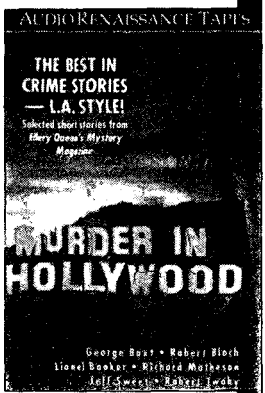
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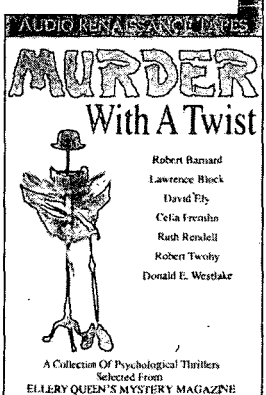

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The P.I. story is surely one of the most difficult forms for a crime writer to carry off successfully. On the one hand, there is the danger of cliche and self-parody, and on the other, the need to enhance the first person narrative with colorfully expressed observations and a slice of the P.I.'s inner life. We think the author of "Czech for a Short Bier" has struck a true note with this story told just slightly tongue in cheek . . .

CZECH FOR A SHORT BIER

by WILLIAM BEECHCROFT

After I left the interstate, the first thing I discovered was that Dooganville is one isolated Appalachian mountain town. After I'd wound along State Route 53 for a half-hour of autumn-crisped trees and sharp turns around rocky outcrops, the second thing I found out was that the guy I'd come to see was dead.

But I'd had to push hard for that news.

"Who?" asked lean and mean-looking Sheriff Mac Lindquist in his storefront office at the near end of his single-street town. He hadn't bothered to take his combat-booted feet off his desk when I'd come in, and they were still there. "You say his name is Komensky?"

"Rad Komensky, from Radnor, Pennsylvania," I told him. "Rad short for Konrad."

"Oh, you mean Radnor Rad. Fella just over three feet tall." Fingers laced behind his balding head, Lindquist nodded. "Guess Rad was the fella you're looking for."

" 'Was'? He wasn't more than forty, forty-five. What happened to him? Heart?"

"Head." Lindquist wormed his rump deeper into his creaky swivel chair. "Bashed it against some rocks when he fell down a bank in the woods over by Wolf Lake. Broke his neck."

"When?"

"A month back. Why you so interested in a dead dwarf, Mr. . . . What'd you say your name was?"

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"Montgomery. Elrod Montgomery. Mr. Komensky was an employee of mine—a friend. I run a P.I. agency just outside Philly. Rad worked for me for a time."

"Radnor Rad a P.I.? Don't seem appropriate. Too easy to spot."

"Who'd expect a little person to be a P.I.?"

Lindquist nodded. "See what you mean. Back in Pea Eh. Thought he was a foreigner."

"His parents were immigrants from Czechoslovakia." I leaned against the filing cabinet in Lindquist's dinky office. "How'd he come to take a fall like that?"

"How'd you come to be here now, Elrod?"

He'd put a little twist on the name I'd never liked, but I didn't appreciate other people sneering at it. And I was beginning not to appreciate Sheriff Mac Lindquist.

"First vacation I've had in years," I told him. "Man edges up on fifty, still no wife in sight, decides he'd better see the country while he's still able. I thought I'd drop by for a couple hours and chew the fat with Rad. Now you tell me he's dead."

"It's a fact. So you might as well move on, Elrod. There's nothing for you here."

That struck me as an odd thing to say. I got the feeling the sheriff wasn't telling me everything. Rad had come here two years ago to take care of his asthmatic sister. He'd written me that he'd found himself a job, then a couple of months back he'd written that she'd died. But he was still working, doing okay, and he hoped I remembered him. That was when I'd decided to drop by to see him on this vacation swing.

"Nothing here for you," Lindquist repeated.

"Well, it's a tad late in the day. This burg got a motel?"

Lindquist sighed, and his boots finally hit the floor. He pushed out of the chair to stand a good half head over me, but he wasn't nearly as heavy. "Look, Elrod, it was an accident. He was heading for the lake in the dark, fell down the bank."

"What was he doing wandering around in the woods in the dark?"

"Checking out something at Grady's Docks, I guess. That's where he worked. Caulking, painting boats, repairing the slips. And he wasn't wandering in the dark. He had a flashlight. Got it right here." He reached in a drawer of his desk and pulled out a three-celled flash with a sliding switch. "It was in working order. I turned it on to check."

"You found him?"

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"After old man Grady reported he didn't show up for work for two days."

"A motel?" I pressed.

The sheriff shrugged surprisingly narrow shoulders. "Dooganville Lodge, other end of town."

The other end of town was visible from this end. I slid back in my dusty Ford and drove the three blocks. Calling the four clapboard cabins huddled back beneath a stand of maples a "lodge" was a high compliment. In the office shack out front was a woman who could have been a stand-in for Ma Kettle in the black-and-white movie days . . . when Dooganville Lodge must have been built.

Her voice was as dry and crackly as the old farm-auction poster on the wall behind her. "You'd be the friend of Radnor Rad."

Shook me for a couple of seconds. Then I nodded at the dial phone on the counter. "Didn't take your sheriff long to give me an intro."

The thin lips grinned. "You're right quick, mister. Never did cotton to Mac Lindquist prying into everybody's business. Sure don't 'preciate him telling me to keep my mouth shut 'bout that poor little fella, Rad."

I came to full alert. "He told you that?"

"Word's out all over town to keep shut of that particular subject. Burns my buns."

I signed the fly-specked registration pad, then looked up at her. "Rad was an associate of mine. A friend. You got something to tell me about him?"

"That's the problem. I don't." Then she looked over my shoulder into the street through the window behind me. And she leaned close. "But I know somebody who does. If she would talk, you being a stranger and all."

"Maybe me being a friend of Rad might make a difference. She got a name?"

"Sarah Brauer. She worked at the After Hours until about a month ago when she quit. Now she just putters around her house. Husband's went off with somebody else, son's gone off to the navy. She's all alone."

"How can I get in touch with her?"

"There's the phone. Here's the book."

Sarah Brauer didn't want to meet me at her house. She suggested a fast-food place all the way back at the interstate interchange. One scared woman, I thought. Driving there, I got the feeling I was being

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followed. Who wouldn't, the way this was shaping up? But the road was so twisty through these hills, I couldn't check behind me. Didn't see anybody at all, once I was a couple of miles out of Dooganville.

It was almost dark when I reached the cluster of gas stations and food stops along I-75 and pulled into the Queenburger. Fair crowd in there, but I spotted Sarah right off because she wore the mustard-colored scarf she'd mentioned on the phone.

At the counter, I bought a box of Chicken Digits, slaw, and coffee, and swivel-hipped to her table in a remote corner.

"Mr. Montgomery?" Her voice was squeaky. Not a bad looker in a washed-out sort of way. A little makeup would have helped, along with a replacement for her shapeless blue dress and baggy white cardigan.

"Mrs. Brauer? Really appreciate your meeting me on such short notice." I eased into the hard plastic seat opposite her. "Don't you want more than coffee? I'd be glad to—"

"Not hungry, thanks. You go ahead." She glanced around like a cornered rabbit. But the place was filling up, and I figured we were lost in the crowd.

"I shouldn't be doing this," she said.

"Nobody'll ever know." I took a drag of coffee and waited.

"I didn't see it happen. I was back in the kitchen."

"At the After Hours?"

She nodded. "It's a taproom, but they have a little sandwich kitchen behind the bar. I was back there—"

Her eyes suddenly riveted on something or somebody across the restaurant. I looked over there. Just crowd.

I turned back to Sarah. "What is it?"

She already had her purse in her hand. "Gotta go. Sorry." And she was gone, slipping through the crowded restaurant like a spooked eel.

By the time I got outside, she was in her car, heading outbound. I jumped in mine, but by the time I dodged an overeager Buick trying to zip into my space, she had whipped her Toyota out of there. I watched her taillights wink out around the first bend back to Dooganville.

Couldn't catch her. I almost did, halfway back, but a pickup bounced out of a side road and cut me off. Stopped dead in front of me. I damned near broadsided him.

A cloud of blue smoke from maybe three months' worth of burned-up tire drifted past. As it cleared, I sneezed, then looked up into the

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meanest pair of squinted eyes I'd seen outside of Clint Eastwood.

My door flew open, a blue-shirted arm snaked in, and I was yanked into the night by a two-legged mountain. He bunched my shirt in one hand and began to slap me with the other. Thank God he didn't make that dinner plate of a hand into a fist. As it was, my face felt like a piece of beef under attack by a tenderizing mallet. I made a move to hit him back, and only then did I realize another Cro-Magnon had his clamps on my arms. I stood and took it, stood longer than necessary because the backup goon kept me standing.

"Don't even think about going back to town," Platter Hands rumbled. "You hear me?"

Then they were gone, just like that. I slithered down the side of my car and through the swelling lids watched the pickup's lights disappear. I was five hundred miles inland, but I thought I could hear the ocean. Then I realized it was my ears singing. I felt my jaw. Nothing broken except maybe a couple of eardrums.

Then, above the sizzle, I heard a car. Coming from the Dooganville direction. It stopped with its headlights on me.

"Omigod!" Sarah Brauer wailed. "I saw them pull out just as I went by. Stopped in a driveway, then when your car didn't show up, I figured . . . Omigod, look at you!"

"Superficial," I said, trying hard to stand up on legs made out of pudding. "Who were they?"

"I'm not naming names. They might . . . You might . . ."

"For Pete'th thake, Therah—" My tongue was swelling up. "Tell me *thomething*."

"Can you drive?"

"Think tho." I got back in the Ford. "Yeth."

"Ask them at the After Hours about the broken light."

"The what? Therah, come back here!"

But she had run back to her car. At full alert for menacing pickups, I followed her into Dooganville until she pulled away into a narrow side street in the middle of town, then into a driveway a hundred yards down. Anything to be gained by pushing into her house? I thought not, and there was that one little piece of info she'd given me. A broken light?

I hadn't passed the After Hours on the east side of town, so I deduced it had to be somewhere out the west end. I found it soon enough, not by the halo of light I expected, but by the gaggle of cars around the dark building. The place was a frame ramble, tastefully

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facaded with gritty tarpaper. Night life à la Dooganville.

I parked heading outward for an efficient departure, should that be a necessary option. Head ringing, but tongue subsiding, I made for the door.

I heard music in there. Kind of a gut-curling thump with a wailing fiddle override. Boondocks Beguine. When I opened the solid plank door, the noise rolled all over me. But when I made it through the crowd and bellied up to the splintery bar, it stopped. Or my ears had finally given out.

Then a voice like a fifty-gallon drum rolling downhill rumbled, "Man ain't got the sense of a cockeyed tick-hound!"

My God, it was Platter Hands, sucking up beer, no doubt to celebrate the expunging of an unwanted visitor. But here I was, as dumb as corncobs, ready for another ear-banging. Except I hoped there was some safety in numbers.

I looked around the room, not at the sour faces around me at the bar who were waiting for rumble-gut to make a decision, but at the lights along the wall. Dim little pairs of plastic candles with fake flame bulbs. All intact. What had Sarah Brauer been talking about?

Then I looked up. Three chandeliers hung up there, wagon wheels with bulbs at the ends of their spokes. Four bulbs in the middle one, all on one side, were a lot brighter and not as fly-specked as the rest.

When I looked back down, I was ringed by a cluster of redneckish types, one small and worried-looking, the other half-dozen as reassuring as pit bulls aquiver, and all of them towered over by Platter Hands, obviously top dog.

"You in a barrel of trouble, boy," he rumbled. "P.I. out of his jurisdiction. Mac Lindquist told me," he said into my surprised expression. "Sheriff and me is close as spit on a sidewalk."

I squinted at the worried fellow among them, and I decided that since life itself is a bad-odds gamble, I was going to take another.

"The Philadelphia stuff was a cover. I'm from the state police."

Worrywart's face twisted in anguish. "The state?"

"Yep." I flashed my private-eye badge. "And my people know I'm here."

His eyes bugged. "Wasn't my toss!" he squawked. "Not me. It was Thursday."

"Shut up, Ernie!" Platter Hands roared. "Listen, you clowns, this is no state cop. That was a P.I. badge he flashed. Now *you,"* he yelled at me, "you get your butt out of here! Hit the road whilst you're still

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able. Let him through, boys. He's got no jurisdiction, and he's going on his way like a good fella."

I got out while the getting was good. Heading back into Doogan-ville, I wondered if I'd learned anything at all. Look for a broken light, Sarah Brauer had said. I'd found it. "Wasn't my toss," Worry-wart had yipped. What in hell did that mean? And his crack about Thursday? None of this made sense.

Except the curious fact about Rad's flashlight.

I parked close to my drab little cabin, figuring maybe I could hear any funny business going on out there during the night. Then I discovered there weren't any towels in the phone-booth-sized bath-room. I walked over to the office. The light was still on, and the door was open at ten P.M. I went in and rang the counter bell.

Ma Kettle shuffled in through a door behind the counter. In a ragged terrycloth robe. She lived back there.

"Mr. Montgomery?"

"Sorry to be so late, but you forgot to put towels—"

"*What* happened to your face?"

"Big man, little brain, wants me out of here."

"That'd be Thursday."

"No, that'd be tonight."

"I mean Ben Thursday," she said. "Hands like coal-stove lids, voice like a bull. Ben Thursday. He . . . He . . . I'll get your towels."

When she came back, I took the threadbare things. Then I looked straight into her watery blue eyes. "What is it I should know about our friend Ben Thursday?"

She dropped her gaze to stare at her dusty countertop. "Every-body's afraid of him, except . . . You know about women who are kind of, uh, drawn to that sort of man? His power, maybe."

"You afraid or drawn?" I asked her.

"Afraid, I guess, like everybody else." Then her washed-out eyes hardened. "But I'm mad, too, damn it!"

"About what?"

"About . . . You gotta swear you never heard this from me."

"I swear."

"I'm mad about him and Jenny."

"Who's Jenny?"

"Jenny Lindquist," she said, meeting my eyes again. "The sheriff's wife—and my sister."

"Jenny and Ben Thursday are a 'thing'?"

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She nodded sourly. "Jenny told me. It's like an addiction. She can't get herself to break off, but she's scared to death Mac will find out."

"Who else knows?"

"Nobody, I reckon. She and Ben meet at the lake at night when nobody's there."

Platter Hands Thursday and the sheriff's wife! That was a stunner. I hadn't seen her, of course, but I'd seen juiceless Mac Lindquist. It was possible that his neglected wife would be drawn to a virile mountain like Thursday, despite his crudeness. Maybe because of it.

A light dawned. "You're hoping I can break it up somehow, aren't you?"

Her thin, bluish lips tightened into something close to a smile.

I walked back to the cabin with my arms full of towels and my head full of confusion, took a shower, turned on the battered air-conditioning unit, which made a noise like a kid running a stick along pickets, turned it off, and opened the paint-starved window a crack.

I lay in the sticky dark and tossed and turned. Tossed? That's what Worrywart had blurted back in the After Hours. "It was Thursday," the guy had whined. Thursday's toss? An ugly thought hit me. Then the whole thing hit me, and I don't think I slept more than an hour. Radnor Rad was becoming a forgotten man here because certain people didn't want to remember him.

Sheriff Mac Lindquist squinted at my misused face. "You here to press charges? Word on the street is you got slapped around some last night."

"Not much of a street out there, not much of a word you got, either, if that's all you got."

Lindquist poured coffee from a Mr. Coffee machine into a mug inscribed: *What people say behind your back is your standing in the community*. "You look like you could use some yourself," he offered.

"No, thanks." I gestured at the mug. "Appropriate sentiment."

" 'Specially in this town."

"That's the truth."

"So what brings you here this morning?"

"I'll bet you had an autopsy done on Rad, right?"

"It's the law in a death like that."

"You got a copy?" I asked him.

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He rooted in a drawer of the filing cabinet and handed me the stapled form.

I skimmed it and found what I'd expected. "Didn't it bother you that glass particles were found in the facial abrasions?"

"Figured he'd hit pieces of a busted bottle somebody left out there."

"Sheriff, it says here the particles looked like they came from a thin-walled glass object. My money's on light bulbs. The busted ones recently replaced in the middle chandelier down at the After Hours."

Lindquist didn't change expression, but his eyes took on a hard glitter.

"Covered it up, right? Better than even money you were there yourself, Sheriff."

"It was an accident."

"It's illegal in this state, isn't it? A sick fad a couple years back, but dwarf tossing is illegal now. How low can this town go?"

"It was only a game, tossing for distance into mattresses the boys brought in their pickups after the place closed for regular business. Rad didn't mind. He was getting paid."

"And Thursday's toss crashed him head-on into the chandelier."

"It was—" He licked dry lips, cleared his throat. "It was an accident," he repeated.

"Maybe. So after Ben Thursday threw him hard enough to break his neck, Rad was carried into the woods by you sportsmen and put at the bottom of the drop-off. A fake fall. But you made a mistake with the flashlight."

"What mistake?"

"You told me you turned it on to check if it worked. Which meant it was off when it was found next to Rad's body. But if he'd been picking his way through the woods at night where he had to know there was a dangerous drop-off, he surely would have had his flashlight on."

Lindquist sank into his chair and took a deep drag on his coffee mug. "We took up a collection and buried him in the town cemetery. The undertaker over in Frampton put him in a kid's coffin. A kid's coffin . . ." He looked up. "What did you mean, 'maybe' it was an accident? I was there."

"You know what kind of a woman chaser Ben Thursday is?"

"Everybody knows that. I'm not even surprised you know."

"I'll give you odds Rad went out to Wolf Lake to check something he was working on, saw Ben there with somebody's wife, somebody

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Thursday sure didn't want to find out about their torrid tangle out on the dock. My thought is that he spotted Rad watching them, and when the chance came, it was lights out for Rad. No pun intended."

"You've flipped your wig, Montgomery, coming in here with a story like that." But now there was no steam behind his words. Then he said, "Whose wife?"

"Rumor, Lindquist. A big man around town." I eyed him slowly, from his boots six feet four inches up to his balding pate, and watched the color drain out of his face.

"Hit the road, Montgomery. Now. Get on with your vacation. Go on, get out of here." Not friendly. Not unfriendly, either. I got. But I shot a look at him as I went through the door. He was strapping on the biggest double-action Colt I'd seen this side of John Wayne.

On the way back to the interstate, I passed the entrance to the Dooganville Cemetery, backed up, drove in. And I found the grave. Just a small, unmarked mound. I couldn't help Radnor Rad now, the little person who wanted to be remembered. I started to drive to the interstate. Then I stopped and turned back toward Dooganville. At least I could do something about a marker.

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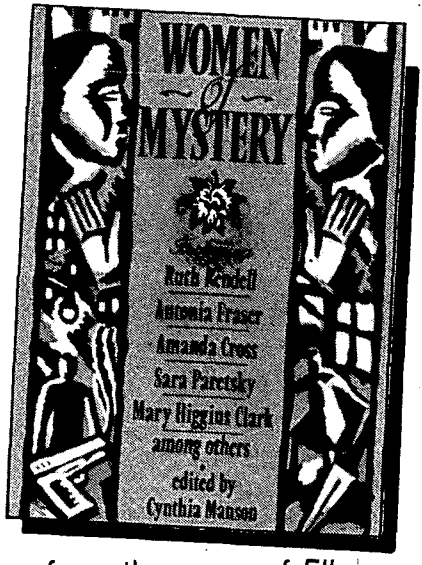
TOP WHODUNITS BY THE TOP WOMEN IN THE FIELD



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a *NEW* short story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

A former grandmaster of the Mystery Writers of America, Michael Gilbert wrote his first book more than sixty years ago. The dozens of novels and stories, and numerous stage, radio and television plays that compose his output show an extraordinary range, from spy fiction to police procedurals to romantic thrillers. A mark of all his stories is the solid development of character we see in such works as the following . . .

JUDITH

by MICHAEL GILBERT

Two hundred years ago Belling was an island. A hundred years later, with the draining of the fens, it had turned into a prosperous farming community. Fifty years after that, as its nearest neighbour, Woodhall Cross, developed into an industrial complex, it became something between a large village and a small town. It had always had a church and a school. When the census showed that the number of its inhabitants had topped two thousand, its upward progress was crowned by the award of its own police station.

Through all these changes and developments it had remained, as P.C. Hennessy often told the vicar, a village at heart. "And thank the Lord," he would add, "a quiet village. A little noisy, perhaps, at the Annual Feast, but no one minds a bit of horseplay once a year."

A Monday in early December was to change all that.

Mrs. Franklund lived in one of the three cottages in Binders Lane, on the northern fringe of the village. She had lost her husband shortly after the birth of her only child, Ellen. Ellie was a fair-haired mite, eleven years old, but looking much younger. She had attended the village school since she was six and had now been

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promised a place at Woodhall Grammar School. To make sure that she would be able to do so Miss Hooker, headmistress of the village school, had offered to give her an hour's extra tuition on Mondays and Thursdays. This would take place after the younger children had left the school, at half-past three.

Mrs. Franklund was grateful, but one thing worried her. As the year ran on towards Christmas, by half-past four dusk was going to be setting in. True, the distance between the school and her house was not much more than a quarter of a mile; up East Street, along the flank of Abbacy Copse, turn right at the top into Binder Lane, and there you were. But alone! And in the dusk, with a mist coming up as it did so often from the fenland which encircled the village to the north. Ellie was the whole of her mother's life. Unthinkable to take chances with her.

In spite of a rheumatic hip which made walking difficult, Mrs. Franklund would willingly have hobbled down to the school and brought Ellie home herself. Happily, an alternative had presented itself. Miss Hooker had extended her offer of extra tuition to Martin Amherst, eldest son of the vicar. He was a stalwart boy of twelve. For a small addition to his weekly pocket money he had agreed to escort Ellen to her front door.

On this particular evening he carried out three quarters of his duty. The land along the left side of Abbacy Copse curved slightly, but by standing on the verge of the roadway he could see Ellie almost up to the corner. When she was perhaps twenty yards from it he turned and ran. He was late for a most important date with Tim Pollard, who had acquired a videotaper which he proposed to use on the B.B.C. programme that started at 4:30. It was now 4:35.

When Ellie was not home by twenty to five, her mother comforted herself by remembering that, more than once, Miss Hooker had kept her back to finish a piece of work.

But never for more than a quarter of an hour. By five o'clock that wisp of comfort had faded. She telephoned the school, but got no answer. There was just one more possibility. Might Ellie have gone back with Martin to the rectory? It had happened once before. She tried the rectory, but got no reply there either. The rector and his wife were out and Martin had gone straight to Tim Pollard's house.

Not knowing what to do, she did what most people in Belling seemed to do when in distress. She hobbled along to the cottage on her left where she found Judith Lyte in the kitchen playing Animal Snap with her two younger children, Sarah and Jenny. Tea was

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waiting for the return of the older two, Becky and Mark. They were at Woodhall Grammar and had not yet got home.

As soon as she understood what the distraught Mrs. Franklund was trying to tell her, Judith rang the police station.

P.C. Hennessy was a great admirer of Mrs. Lyte. She was not only chairman of the Parish Council and one of the acknowledged leaders of the community, but was something else—something difficult to describe. He listened carefully to what she had to say, switched his telephone to "answer," shouted to his wife to mind the front desk, and set out into the thickening mist.

When he reached Binders Lane he found that Mrs. Lyte had telephoned the post office, as the quickest way of spreading the news, and a small search party was already on hand. The news had even penetrated the Pollard house and a white-faced Martin had told them where he had seen Ellie last. He said, over and over again, "At the corner. She'd almost turned the corner," as though speaking the words somehow exculpated him.

Abbacy Copse was clearly the first place to search. It produced no sign of Ellie. On the other side of the copse and filling the space between it and the end of Binders Lane was an odd patch of wasteland known as the Rectory Piece. It was part of the old glebe and the rector's predecessor had allowed half a dozen structures to be put up on it, the rents of which helped out his slender stipend. Two of them were solid, breeze block affairs, one used by Newton, the clearance contractor, to park his heavy machinery; the other by the rector himself for the storage of church furniture and oddments. The other four were smaller and were built of tarred timber. Since they were all securely padlocked, they were, for the moment, ignored.

With the arrival of the bus bringing back children from the grammar school and cars with men returning from their work, the search party grew and set out on what seemed to be a hopeless search of the fen. It was quite dark now and the mist was thicker than ever. After an hour had produced only frustration and falls into the dykes that crisscrossed the fields, the rector, in consultation with Ted Willows, called a halt. Ted was an expert on fen weather. "Like it or not," he said, "we'll have a breeze by early morning. And the moon will be up."

The searchers retired for repairs and refreshment to the Bull, which was the unofficial centre of Belling. By one o'clock Ted had been proved a true prophet, and it was under a cold moon three hours later that the bedraggled body of Ellen Franklund was lifted

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from a dyke four hundred yards north of the village. Her dress had been pulled off and then knotted round her neck. Her face was a mass of blood and bruises.

Hennessy then did what he should have done many hours earlier. He sent for help.

It arrived at half past six in two cars. The first one contained Detective Inspector Waite and the county pathologist. The second, Detective Sergeant Copsey and the coroner's officer. Waite was a smallish man, with the eyes and teeth of a fox terrier. He said, "I want all the men in the village—and when I say men I include boys of twelve or more." As he said this he looked at Copsey, who nodded. He had just concluded a case in which three boys had raped a schoolgirl. "Get them together in whatever's the most convenient place."

"The church," said Judith, and the rector nodded. "We could get five hundred in there, standing."

Very few people in the village had gone to bed, and whilst the few men who had were being roused, Waite and the pathologist examined the child's body and paid a visit to Abbacy Copse.

At seven o'clock the inspector climbed onto the step beside the pulpit and addressed the crowd that filled the aisles and transepts and had spread into the choir and sanctuary. He said, "Yesterday evening, at twenty-five minutes to five, somebody took Ellen Franklund into the wood up there—" He gestured over his shoulder and heard the murmur, "Abbacy Copse." "Is that what you call it? Well, that's where he took her. She may even have gone willingly. We think she probably knew the man." Heads turned and people started to look at each other as the significance of this sank in. "When he had her safely in the wood, I expect he terrified her by telling her what he'd do if she made a sound. Then he ripped off her dress, pushed her down onto the ground, and got on top of her. When he had had whatever satisfaction he could get from her small body he got up, seized her by the ankles, and swung her head, two or three times, against the trunk of a tree."

When he stopped speaking the silence was absolute. It was a silence of shock and held breath. Then he said, "We *know* that this is what happened. We have seen the blood on the tree and there are shreds of bark on the child's forehead. Now you know as much as we know. The rest will have to come from you. I and my sergeant will be questioning you. More than once perhaps. We shall go on until we have the truth." He added, in a more conversational tone, "I know that many of you work outside the village. Before you leave,

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give your names and a note of your destinations to my sergeant."

Probably only Judith Lyte really understood what the inspector was doing. That he had painted the picture of Ellen's death in the coldest and most brutal words possible in order to secure the cooperation of everyone who heard him. It had to be the wholehearted sort of cooperation that would hold steady during the days—maybe the weeks—of questioning that were to come.

Most of the inspector's attention on the first day centered on the six buildings on Rectory Piece. He did not suspect that they had played an immediate part in the crime. He had another reason which, for the moment, he kept to himself. The huts were subjected to minute examination. The team, which now included a forensic scientist, started at the southeast corner with the one used by Mr. Greenslade as a bicycle repair shop. North of that was the hut of Mr. Pollard, a photo-maniac. It housed an elaborate enlarger and other expensive photographic apparatus. The one above that was empty. Beyond that, the hut used by Mr. Coleman, an estate agent with a hobby of making mechanical toys. Next to it were two more elaborate structures: the depot where George Newton kept his heavy machinery and the rector's private store, where Sergeant Copsey spent a baffling hour inspecting presentation vases, broken monuments, and three versions of the Christmas crib.

Binders Lane had to be acquitted. The three cottages in it belonged to Mrs. Franklund, Judith Lyte, and old Mrs. Ambrose, who was deaf and bedridden. The far end of the lane was more promising. Fronting the road up which Ellen had walked to her death were the back gardens of four houses. The Inspector had good reasons for concentrating on them. He argued that a man coming from any of the houses behind them would have to pass many windows before reaching the copse, while a man coming from one of them had only to slip quietly down his own back garden and cross the road.

Further investigation had narrowed the possibilities.

The house owners, starting from the north end, were Mr. Marcus, Mr. Harris, the Misses Farrant, and Mr. Vosper. Mr. Marcus had been in bed with pleurisy, with either his wife or his daughter Angela in attendance. Mr. Harris worked in Woodhall Cross and was vouched for by his secretary and others. Mr. Vosper had been at home all afternoon, allegedly writing letters. No one had seen him until he joined in the search.

At the end of seven days of exhaustive and exhausting work, the inspector reported his conclusions to the chief constable. He said,

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"Having the advantage of knowing when and where this crime was committed, we've been able to acquit the great majority of the village, either by their own testimony or the testimony of their friends and neighbours. They were not my prime suspects. I was merely, as you might say, clearing the undergrowth. Nor was I looking for outsiders. There are only two bridges over the Skirm Dyke and a stranger would have been noticed at once. So I was able to concentrate on this proposition. That the crime must have been committed by someone who knew exactly what Ellen's programme was. Someone who had watched her walking back and had calculated that if her escort took his eyes off her he would have a chance. Therefore it must either be someone with a sound reason for hanging around Binders Lane—which means one of the owners of the huts in it—or someone whose house overlooks it."

The chief constable nodded his agreement.

"Taking the house owners first, we've been able to eliminate three of them." He explained the steps he had taken.

The chief constable said, "So Vosper seems the most likely."

"He heads my list. Then there are the hut owners. George Newton and the rector have got rock-solid alibis. But I can't eliminate any of the other three. Pollard, Greenslade, and Coleman. They're all self-employed, and being their own bosses they can slip out of their offices as soon as their day's work's over and get on with what really interests them—model cars or the like. In fact, Greenslade and Coleman admit that's just what they did. Pollard says he spent some time out in the fen looking for a hide for his bird photography."

"Pollard?" said the chief constable thoughtfully. "Wasn't it his son who lured young Martin away from his job as escort?"

"He's number two on my list."

"Vosper, Pollard, Greenslade, Coleman. It's not a long list, but it's still three too many."

"I agree," said the inspector. "And that's where we come to the real difficulty. If there'd been one suspect, we could have justified asking for a warrant, gone through his house and his clothing, and maybe picked up the clues we wanted. No chance of that now. Vosper, Greenslade, and Coleman are bachelors. Pollard's a widower. Like most of the houses in the village, they have wood-burning stoves. By now they could have destroyed every atom of the clothing they were wearing that evening."

"So you're stuck?"

"For the moment, yes."

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"You realise that if he gets away with it, he'll probably do it again."

"Next time," said the inspector bitterly, "they may call us in at once. Before they've trampled over every helpful mark on the ground."

Constable Hennessy, who was in the inspector's confidence, was able to report the gist of this to the only person in the village he felt able to confide in. Judith Lyte listened in silence. Then she said, "If the professionals are giving up, the amateurs must take a hand."

That evening she mustered her private army. It consisted of her four children. Rebecca was fifteen, Mark thirteen, Sarah eleven, and Jennifer nine. They showed no open surprise at what she said to them, although her idea was startling.

So far the search had proceeded along the upper level, the level inhabited by responsible adults, all willing to help, most of them speaking the truth. Now Judith had resolved to explore the lower level, the underworld where children lived and moved.

From studying her own family and their wide circle of friends, she had concluded that the eyes and ears of children formed an astonishing information service which would tell you all you wanted to know if you were patient, and if you could read its code.

It was not an easy code. Children had their private customs and taboos. They lied consistently and successfully. They talked sense and nonsense mixed. This was the network she was asking her children to tune in to.

She said, "I'm convinced that some child knows something. Maybe they don't appreciate the significance of it. Maybe they're frightened to speak. I'm particularly interested in the girls. Girls talk to each other."

"Nonstop," said Mark.

"Boys are just as bad," said Rebecca.

They both attended the Woodhall Grammar School. The two younger ones were still at the village primary school. Thus she had spies in both camps and found, at the conferences that took place each evening, that she was being presented, slowly, with a conspectus of both schools; the loyalties and treacheries, the feuds and alliances, the double-cross and the treble-cross. A pattern as intricate as in any medieval Italian city.

"Look for abnormalities," she said. "Time's running out. We must do this before the end of term."

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It was on the fifth evening, among a host of other trivialities, that Mark said, "If you want abnormalities, here's one for you. Billy Sherwood came to school today with a lovely black eye—a real shiner."

"Nothing unusual about that," said little Jennifer virtuously. "Boys are always fighting."

"What was unusual about it was that it was his older brother, Roger, who hit him. Normally they're pretty good friends. This time Roger lost his temper because Billy was teasing him about losing his girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" said Judith. "For goodness sake, isn't he a bit young for that sort of thing?"

The look on her family's faces showed Judith that she had committed the serious crime of being square.

"Most of the boys have girlfriends," said Mark. "What really upset him was that his steady had dropped him *for another girl.* She'd stolen her from her regular pash."

To reestablish her position, Judith said, "You don't have to explain about pashes. After all, I was six years at boarding school."

"I think it's a bit more organised now than it was in your day," said Rebecca kindly. "All older girls are supposed to have one or two young adorers. They're called strings."

"I suppose you've got half a dozen," said Mark. "Did you know that she was the most popular girl in the school?"

"Pipe down," said his mother. "I want to understand this. Let's have it again, with names."

"Well, there was this girl Lucilla. She had two regular strings. Angela and Vicky. Vicky's a bit of a smasher herself, so she thought the time had come to stop being a string and pick up a couple of adorers. And the first one she collected was Patricia, who had been Roger's steady. Okay?"

"Say it all again slowly," said Judith. And when he had done this, "So Lucilla's left with only one string, Angela. Bad luck, no doubt, but—"

"It was worse than that, because Angela suddenly went right off her, too. In fact, she seemed to go right off everything."

"Meaning what?"

"Went broody. Seemed frightened to open her mouth."

"Has she got a surname?"

"Her name's Marcus."

"The girl who was looking after her father with pleurisy?"

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"That's the one. She was allowed two afternoons off a week so that her mother could get out and do the shopping."

Judith felt like an angler who has fished long and patiently and sees the float disappear and feels the line grow taut. Too soon to be sure what it would lead to, but the catch was there. No doubt of it.

She said, "You've got just the one job now, Becky. Sack all your existing adorers and fasten Angela Marcus to you with hoops of steel."

"I'm not sure—"

"If you're as popular as Mark says, I'm sure you'll be able to do it. I suppose there's an accepted technique—"

"What you do is, you smile at her during morning prayers. If she doesn't look away, you get hold of her afterwards and ask her what her favourite hymn is—they've all got favourite hymns—and you go off to Miss Norton, who plays the piano, and ask if you can have it next morning. She's a decent sort and usually says yes."

"And then?"

"When the hymn's being sung you smile again. If she smiles back, she's hooked."

"Can you do it?"

Rebecca giggled. "It'll be a bit of a rush job."

Two days later she reported that the first step had been taken.

"The hymn she chose did it. 'Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom.' Now I'm the light and she's the gloom. And then some! Yesterday behind the pavilion she told me her life story."

"But she didn't tell you what had upset her."

"No. But I'm sure she's going to. She's longing to tell someone."

That was on the Wednesday. On the Friday when Becky came home, her mother saw that her face was white and that she looked as if she had been sick, or was going to be. She took her into the kitchen and bolted the door. Then she said, "Let's have it, love."

"It was horrible. If I'd had any idea what it was going to be, I couldn't have gone on with it. Before she'd tell me, she made me swear not to tell anyone. Then she agreed I could tell you, if you swore the same thing."

Her mother thought about this for some time whilst the other children, realising that something serious had happened, stopped trying to break down the kitchen door. Then she said, "Very well. You have my word."

"That evening, you know—when it happened—she'd left her father's bedroom to fetch something from the kitchen at the back of

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the house. She saw Ellie coming up the road and she saw Mr. Coleman step out, say something to her, and lead her by the hand back into the wood."

"And said nothing about it to anyone."

"She couldn't. Her father works for Mr. Coleman *and* owes him money. If the police tried to get the story out of her, she'd deny it. I'm sure of that."

"All right," said her mother. "Now you can forget all about it."

"But what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to think about it."

For three weeks she did nothing, except think. And her thoughts were confused and uncomfortable.

If she passed on Angela's story to the police, they would question her, and she would deny it. Would probably say that she'd made it all up. If she kept quiet, Coleman would have got away with his filthy crime. More, when a suitable interval had elapsed, as the desire built up and the secret itch became intolerable, he would try again. Who would be the next little Ellie?

As an estate agent, he had every excuse for touring the countryside in his car, finding empty houses he could use. In the end a child would be dragged into one of them. On this occasion, he would have more time to enjoy himself. Thinking about all of this, she came to a conclusion.

Traditionally, her two eldest went for the last week of the Christmas holidays to stay with her elder sister and sample the mild dissipations of the county town. On the night after they left, with the two younger ones safely in their beds, she was able to make the first move.

She went out just after midnight. On her way to Coleman's workshop hut she had only two cottages to pass and no observation to fear from either. Mrs. Franklund's was empty—the vicar's wife had taken her under her wing and she slept at the rectory. Old Mrs. Ambrose's was as tightly shut as the eyes and ears of its occupant. The moon escaped the clouds from time to time and glinted on the trowel she held in her hand.

The door and tiny barred window of Coleman's hut were both in the front wall. The rear wall had no openings in it, and weeds and undergrowth were encroaching on its base. She used her gloved hands to pull it away and scooped out the earth underneath. Six inches down she struck the concrete base of the hut.

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After half an hour of careful work she had formed a sharp-sided trench, running the length of the wall. This she covered by allowing the weeds and undergrowth to fall back over it.

There was one other thing to do before she left. She went round to the front of the hut to examine the door. Its fastening was a metal flange that fitted over a staple and was held there by a padlock. She had brought with her a wooden peg and this she whittled down with a knife until she estimated it would fit snugly into the staple when the padlock was removed.

After that she went back to bed.

She had studied Coleman's movements. He left his office as late as six o'clock if he was busy, as early as four o'clock if things were slack, and usually made his way straight up to the hut. As a bachelor, he had little else to occupy him in the evenings. He was never away before eight and sometimes stayed there until ten o'clock. She would see his light go on and hear the clatter of his metal-cutter.

Now she had to wait on the weather.

On the third night the wind got up, gusting from the southwest. She packed her shopping bag and set off to destroy Mr. Coleman.

First she refastened the metal flange, driving her wooden peg firmly into the staple. Then she arranged six paraffin-based fire lighters end to end along the trench she had dug and put a match to them. When she was sure they were well alight, she started back towards her house. Already she could hear the crackling as the flames, driven by the wind, caught hold of the tarred wood of the wall. She saw the door shaking as though someone was trying, desperately, to open it.

The fire was building up now. Standing ten yards away, she could feel the heat of it on her cheeks. At one moment she thought she saw hands clinging to the bars of the little window.

By that time, the flames had reached the roof.

Hennessy said, "When the fire people could get into what was left of the hut, they said they could smell paraffin. According to Greenslade, Coleman had a paraffin stove and kept a small reserve of the stuff. He'd once borrowed some from him for his own stove."

"And you think," said Inspector Waite, "that he may have upset the stove and panicked when he couldn't get the door open. Why couldn't he?"

"I can only think the latch may have jammed. There was nothing left of the door to go by, but they did find the padlock inside the hut."

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"And that's your idea of what happened?"

Hennessy took some time thinking out his answer to this. Then he said, "I can tell you one thing. It's not what the village think."

"And what do they think?"

"You must bear in mind, sir, that this is rather a primitive place. They think that what happened proves beyond question that Coleman was the murderer and that he's been punished for his crime."

"Punished by whom?"

"In their eyes, it was a fire from heaven that destroyed him."

"And is that unanimous?"

"I'd say so, yes."

Hennessy was nearly right, but not quite.

The vicar had been the first on the scene of the fire. Although it was clearly too late to do anything effective, he had rushed down to Judith Lyte's house to use her telephone. He had met Judith coming out of her front door. The fire was now so strong that its flames lit up her face.

He said, "If poor Coleman was trapped inside, I'm afraid it's too late to save him."

"Much too late," said Judith.

It was not only the tone of her voice. It was the look on her face that troubled him. Calm, composed, triumphant. He had seen that look before. But where?

It was three years later that he found it, in the Louvre, in the painting by Raphael of Judith leaving the tent of the tyrant Holofernes, carrying his head in a bag. She had that same look of remorseless triumph on her face.

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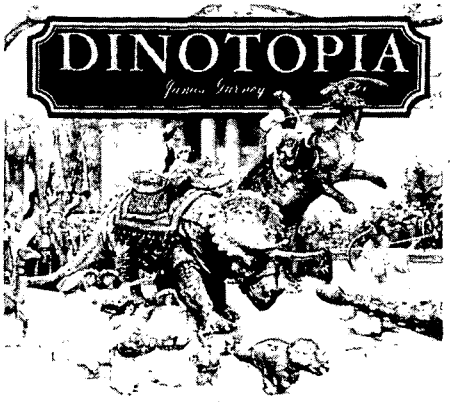
WORLDS OF WONDER THAT CHARM, ENTERTAIN & INSPIRE



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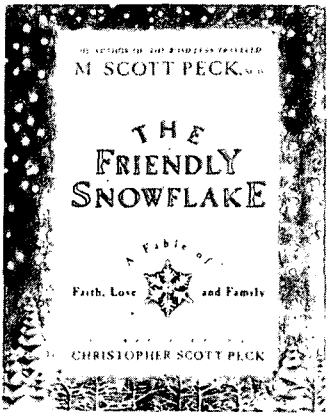

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

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LEOPOLD AT REST

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Tod Baxter was a very ordinary-looking man, average in height and weight, middle-aged, with graying hair and a gap-toothed smile. He might have seen his double any day of the week among the corporate lawyers lunching at the University Club or even among the homeless men who spent their nights sleeping beneath the Broad Street bridge. Baxter himself was neither a lawyer nor homeless. He worked for his older brother Sam at the lumberyard, and came home each night to the small apartment he'd rented since his divorce three years earlier.

On this particular day, one of those October Saturdays when summer seems to be struggling for a brief comeback among the golden leaves, Tod sat at his kitchen table and thought about Marcy McGregor. More specifically, he thought about Marcy McGregor's husband, Charlie. He knew now, if he hadn't known before, that Charlie McGregor would never allow a divorce, that he intended his marriage to Marcy to last until death. Thinking about that, and knowing he could not go on living without her, he rose from the chair and went to a closet in the bedroom. There was a large box on

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the top shelf, filled with assorted treasures from his former life. He'd packed them up and brought it from his house at the time of the divorce, and hadn't thought of it since.

Now, looking through these memories of a happier time, he ignored most of them until he came upon the Beretta automatic pistol he'd acquired once in a Las Vegas pawn shop, buying it on a whim and tucking it away in his luggage for the flight home. The slide still seemed to function well, and he still had the box of bullets he'd purchased for target shooting but never used. He loaded the weapon, jacking a cartridge into the chamber, and put the safety catch on. Then he slipped the weapon into the pocket of his jacket and went out to the car. The thing would be decided today, one way or the other.

Baxter drove across town to the McGregor home in a fashionable area. Being a Saturday, there was a good chance Charlie would be there along with Marcy, and that was why he'd brought the gun. As he pulled up and parked in front of the house, he could see both of them working together in the backyard. Charlie was cutting the grass with his power mower while Marcy trimmed a hedge.

She saw him first and hurried forward, as if to warn him away before her husband was aware of his presence. But the mower stopped immediately and Charlie McGregor fell into step behind her. "What do you want here, Baxter?" he called out. "You're not welcome here!"

"Tod—," Marcy began, but then she saw the gun. "My God, what are you—"

Her husband saw it too and paused in midstep. He started to say something, but Tod Baxter had listened to enough words already. He aimed the little Beretta and fired point-blank at McGregor's chest.

Marcy screamed as her husband clutched his chest and went down. "The damn fool shot me! Marcy, call the police—"

Tod Baxter could see he was bleeding badly. He grabbed Marcy with his free hand and shouted, "Come on! We have to get out of here now!"

"Are you mad, Tod? I'm not going anyplace with you! My God, there's blood all over—"

A neighbor had appeared from somewhere, approaching gingerly and ready to dive for cover. Marcy was on her knees by her husband, trying to stem the flow of blood from his chest wound. He was gasp-

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ing, close to losing consciousness. Baxter turned and started running toward his car.

Then he heard a siren, off somewhere in the distance, growing louder.

He turned and sprinted away from the car, into a small stand of evergreens. He realized he was still holding the Beretta in his right hand and he threw it to the ground. The siren grew louder and then stopped. Another took up the cry, coming from the opposite direction. He tried to hide behind a tree, to make himself invisible.

"Over there!" someone shouted.

He crouched down, squeezing his eyes shut as he'd done so many times in his childhood. This was a game of hide-and-seek, nothing more.

Then he heard the voice, very close. "Police! Freeze or I'll shoot!"

Charlie McGregor did not die that day, or the next. In critical condition from a bullet wound near the heart, he hovered between life and death. Tod Baxter was arraigned before a judge on Monday morning and bail was set at a half-million dollars. Later, in the visiting room at the county jail, he met with his brother Sam.

"Can't we get the bail reduced? I'll go crazy locked up like this for months awaiting trial!"

Sam Baxter, a dour, balding man eight years older than his brother, shook his head in frustration. "Your lawyer says they're afraid you'll run away. You're divorced, with no real roots in the community."

"No roots! I've lived here most of my life! I've got a job with you and you're certainly a reputable citizen."

"Kid, you tried to kill someone. You tried to kill your girlfriend's husband. Maybe you even succeeded. He's hovering between life and death. If he dies within a year from that wound, it's murder."

"I—"

"Look, you did a damned foolish thing. You're going to prison for it and there's nothing I or anyone else can do to save you. God, Tod, you're forty-one years old! You chase after twenty-eight-year-old married women as if it was your constitutional right!"

"Marcy's not just any woman. She's special."

Sam Baxter sighed. "How can I talk to you when you're like this?"

"Can't you get me out?" Tod pleaded.

"Where in hell would I get a half-million dollars?"

"The lumber business must be worth that much."

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"I'm going to put up my business to get you out of jail?"

"Hell, Sam, I'm not going to run away. I realize I have to pay for what I did. I just need some time to get used to the idea."

Sam shook his head, but it wasn't a final no. "Look, I can't promise anything. I'll talk it over with Rose tonight. It's got to be her decision too."

"Thanks, Sam."

Fletcher decided during his first month as head of the Violent Crimes Squad that he would never get used to being called "Captain." Every time Connie Trent or one of the other detectives uttered the word in his hearing he turned around, looking to see if Leopold had just strolled into the squad room.

"Captain," Connie was saying this time, "do you want some coffee?"

"I do, but I don't expect you to get it for me."

She laughed as she brought him a cup. "I used to do it for Leopold."

"Things are different now, Connie. We both have to realize that."

"I think we'll manage." She sat down across the desk from him and crossed her legs. After the weekend's good weather the days had turned cooler.

"You probably heard about Tod Baxter. He's out on bail."

"Bail! You mean he raised a half-million dollars?"

"His brother put up the lumber business."

Connie Trent sighed. "Do you think he'll have another try at McGregor?"

"The judge specifically ordered him to stay away from the hospital and the McGregor home. Still, we might want to put an officer at the hospital, at least for the next few nights."

"I'll take care of it," Connie assured him. "When is the grand jury getting the case?"

"Next week, I imagine. I'm going to stop at the hospital this afternoon and see if McGregor is strong enough to make a statement."

"What about the wife?"

"She's not talking yet. Claims she didn't see a thing. Her back was turned when she heard the shot, which is a damned lie according to the neighbors."

"She's keeping her options open in case hubby kicks the bucket."

"I suppose so. She doesn't want a dead husband and a jailed lover."

Connie finished her coffee and stood up. "Back to work."

"How's the firebombing case coming?"

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"I'm working with the Arson Squad on it. If they come through with the evidence I should be able to make an arrest by tomorrow."

"Good!" The city was changing, with rival groups of immigrants challenging each other's turf. He supposed it had always been that way, especially in East Coast cities, but in previous generations things were more likely to be settled with fists at the neighborhood bar. Now there were firebombs and assault weapons. And innocent bystanders. At least the Mafia used to brag that they only killed their own. Now the rules had changed, or more accurately there were no rules. A sixty-year-old woman had died in the firebombing, only because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Such was not the case with Charlie McGregor, however. He'd been the intended victim from the start. A few hours later, as Fletcher stood outside the intensive care unit with the doctor, he'd put his other cases out of his mind and was concentrating on this one. "You can't see him," Dr. Greenwald told him. "He's much too weak."

"I'd like to get a statement before the case goes before the grand jury, Doctor."

"Give us a day or two, Captain. Once he's out of danger, we can start building up his strength."

"Then you think he'll make it?"

"Barring infections, he's got a better than even chance. The first forty-eight hours were the crucial ones."

"But I can't see him yet?"

Dr. Greenwald gave him a firm but understanding shake of the head. "Check with me tomorrow."

As he started down the hall to the elevators, Fletcher saw Marcy McGregor walking his way. She was wearing a fancy green dress perhaps better suited to a garden party than a hospital visit, but he was never one to understand women's fashions. "Hello, there," he greeted her. "I'm Captain Fletcher of the Violent Crimes Squad. I spoke with you on Saturday."

"I remember," she replied. "Have you been here questioning Charlie?"

"The doctor wouldn't let me see him."

"I should hope not!"

"When he's able to talk, a statement about the shooting would be helpful. The case will be presented to the grand jury next week."

"I don't understand why you need it. You have the neighbors' testimony."

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"It would help to have something from the victim," he said, pausing an instant before adding, "especially since your back was turned at the crucial moment."

"Do you think I put him up to it?"

"I don't know. There have been reports that you're quite friendly with Tod Baxter. You've been seen around the city together."

"He took me on a tour of his brother's lumberyard. Is that a sin or something?"

"Of course not. Still, he must have had some motive for trying to kill your husband."

"You'll have to ask him about that."

Fletcher had asked him, and gotten nowhere. Baxter mentioned a vague disagreement. He'd taken the gun to frighten McGregor and it had discharged accidentally. No one believed the story, and the district attorney felt sure he could prove in court that Baxter and Marcy McGregor had been having an adulterous affair. Baxter had fled and tried to hide after firing the shot, and that alone could be used against him.

"Thank you, Mrs. McGregor," Fletcher told her and moved on toward the elevators. It was still midafternoon and rather than head directly home, he decided to stop off at Leopold's place.

Leopold had retired in September, just past his sixty-fifth birthday, following some thirty years as head of the city's Homicide and Violent Crimes Squads. Following an early marriage that ended badly, he'd remarried late in life. Now he and Molly lived in a pleasant condominium on the shore of Bradford Bay in the eastern suburbs, having just moved there from their city place. Molly was twenty-seven years younger than her husband, and at the peak of her career as a civil and corporate attorney. She was still a lovely woman as she approached middle age, and Fletcher envied Leopold the joys of retirement. Still, on this day he found his old boss alone down by the water, staring out at the calm surface of the bay.

"Hello, Fletcher. It's good to see you."

"How are things going, Captain?"

Leopold smiled. "I'm not the captain anymore, Fletcher. You are."

"Hell, you'll always be Captain to me, like an ex-president is always President. How are things going? We want to have you and Molly over for dinner one of these nights."

"Give Molly a call. I'm free any time she is."

"Is she here now?"

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"No, she never gets home till six or later. It's a busy season for her."

"Do you have things to pass the time?"

"I've been thinking I should get a boat, but maybe I'm too old to take up sailing."

"You should try writing your memoirs," Fletcher suggested.

"Nobody'd be interested in them, except maybe some of the killers I helped put away." He seemed to make a conscious effort to brighten up. "How about you, Fletcher? What are you working on?"

"The usual things. This McGregor shooting was big news last weekend, but it didn't call for much detective work. Baxter's out on bail now."

"How's Connie?"

"Good. She misses you. When we set up dinner maybe I'll invite her too."

"Well, I have to find something to do with myself. The mayor appointed me to a commission on public safety, but it only meets once a month."

They strolled along the shore for a time, talking about people they both knew, and then Leopold decided to go back inside. "It gets chilly out here by the water in the late afternoon."

"Take care of yourself," Fletcher said. "I'll stop by again, and we'll set up that dinner sometime late next week."

The next morning in the squad room, he told Connie Trent about his visit to Leopold. "He was friendly enough, but I could tell he was bored. He needs something to do, Connie."

She nodded in understanding. "Most people, when they retire, go traveling. Or there are children and grandchildren to help fill the time. Leopold has no children, and Molly's still working. His days are just empty."

"I think I'll phone Molly and see what she thinks about it. I've been Leopold's friend for thirty years and I want to help if I can."

"Oh, there's a message on your desk. Dr. Greenwald phoned this morning from the hospital."

"Not bad news, I hope."

"McGregor is conscious and coherent. The doctor says you can see him for five minutes."

"I'd better go right over before he changes his mind."

Marcy was at McGregor's bedside when Fletcher arrived, and he waited a moment until she left. Then he entered the cubicle in the

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intensive care unit. "I'm Captain Fletcher from the Violent Crimes Squad. Can you hear me, Mr. McGregor?"

The patient still had a tube up his nose and an intravenous line attached to a vein in the back of his hand. "I hear you," he said, fluttering his eyelids.

"Do you feel well enough to make a statement about the shooting?"

"Nothing much to tell. I was cutting the grass and he pulled up in his car." He paused a moment to take a breath. "I told him to get out and he pulled a gun and shot me."

"Mr. McGregor, I'm going to tape record your words. Later, when you're feeling better, we'll need a more formal statement. For purposes of this tape, will you tell me your name?"

"Charlie McGregor."

Fletcher went through the other formalities, recording the time and place of the interview. Then he asked McGregor about the shooting and recorded his response. The nurse had entered to signal that his five minutes were up.

"Two quick questions. Who shot you, Mr. McGregor? Did you recognize him?"

"Of course. It was Tod Baxter."

"Why did he shoot you?"

"He was having an affair with my wife. That was the only way he could get her away from me."

The nurse was tugging on his sleeve. Fletcher turned off the tape machine. "Thank you, Mr. McGregor. I'll be back when you're feeling stronger."

Marcy McGregor was waiting in the hall. "I hope you didn't tire him out, Captain."

"I kept it brief. He seems to be recovering well. By next week he'll be able to give us a more complete statement about exactly what happened."

"Do you really need this?" she asked, her face twisted with indecision.

"Everything will have to come out in court. If you wish to amend your statement—"

"I do!" she decided suddenly. "I saw the whole thing. I'll tell you exactly what happened."

She'd made her decision. Charlie McGregor was going to live, and she'd decided to stick with a winner.

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Saturday morning's newspaper carried the story that Marcy McGregor had decided to testify against her lover. The case would go before the grand jury the following week. It did, on Tuesday, and Baxter was indicted on charges of felonious assault, illegal possession of a firearm, and attempted murder. Now that McGregor appeared to be out of danger, Baxter's lawyer argued for a reduction of bail, but the judge kept it at $500,000.

The following Monday, Connie Trent came into Fletcher's office. "I've located Tod Baxter's former wife. She's using her maiden name again—Grace Smiley. Do you want to talk with her?"

"Wouldn't do any harm. Ask her if she could come in this week."

Grace Smiley arrived on Wednesday morning. She was a woman in her late thirties who might have been fairly attractive. It was difficult to know for certain because her features were all but obscured by layers of makeup. "I travel for a cosmetics firm," she explained, seating herself gingerly on the worn wooden chair in Fletcher's office. "I was out of town at the time of the shooting, but then it didn't really concern me anyway. I'm not surprised at anything Tod would do."

"How long were you married to him?"

"Five years, nearly six. We've been divorced for the last three. He's something in my past."

"Was there another woman?"

"Not that I knew of. My job keeps me on the road a great deal of the time and Tod objected to that. He was the sort who needed a mother more than a wife. I finally just got sick of it."

"He seems to have been having an affair with this McGregor woman. Apparently that's why he shot her husband. Were there ever indications of violent behavior when you were married to him?"

"No, not really. Certainly never against me. I wouldn't have stood still for it. Sometimes he'd go into a rage about something and break a vase or a glass. Once he hurt his hand punching a wall. I think a lot of the problem was his brother."

"Sam Baxter?"

"That's right. Sam is eight years older, and when their father died he more or less raised Tod. He was father and big brother both. He succeeded with his lumber business while Tod foundered in everything he tried. They were very close, always giving each other gifts. Finally Sam had to give him a job."

"Sam put up the bail money," Fletcher told her.

"I'm not surprised. If Tod asked him, he'd do it."

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"The case is pretty open and shut. I gather you knew nothing about Tod's involvement with Marcy McGregor?"

"Not a thing. I don't know the McGregors and I haven't spoken to Tod in nearly a year."

"He did contact you then?"

"Only about some minor points of the property settlement. It wasn't as if we'd had children to keep us in touch over the years."

Fletcher stood up to signify the interview's conclusion. "Thank you for coming in, Ms. Smiley. I doubt if we'll need to contact you again."

He typed up a report on the interview and stuck it in the file.

Connie Trent was on duty Friday night, and Fletcher went to the movies with his wife. When they got home they watched one of the late-night talk shows and then went to bed. He was sleeping soundly when the phone next to the bed awakened him. The clock radio showed the time to be 3:04.

"It's Connie, Captain. Sorry to bother you."

"What? That's all right, Connie. I'm used to it. What's up?"

"I thought you'd want to know. Tod Baxter just killed himself."

A suicide wasn't usually something to rouse Fletcher in the middle of the night and send him out to view the body, but this one was different. He drove to the apartment on the west side of the city. He'd given it a careful search following Baxter's arrest but had found nothing unusual. Now, as he pulled up in front of the building at 3:30 in the morning, he saw a police patrol car, an ambulance, Connie Trent's unmarked car, and an unfamiliar red Buick.

She met him at the door and led him to the upstairs apartment. "It seems fairly straightforward. He phoned his brother to say goodbye and then shot himself. He left a handwritten note too."

Sam Baxter, the obvious owner of the Buick, was standing to one side on the upstairs landing, looking dazed. He nodded to Fletcher, possibly without remembering who he was. Inside the apartment, the body was slouched in an overstuffed chair next to a small end table holding the telephone and a half-empty glass of amber-colored liquid. Baxter had put a snub-nosed revolver in his mouth and pulled the trigger. The bullet had shattered a couple of front teeth before making a mess of the back of his head. His right hand still clutched the revolver with its bloodied barrel, drooped across his stomach.

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"Check everything for prints," Fletcher instructed Connie. "Especially the gun, the phone, and that glass."

"Here's the note he left," she said. "I put it in an evidence bag right away."

It was a single sheet of notepaper that had been folded once in the middle. "Where'd you find it?"

"Right next to the glass, spread flat like this."

He read through it quickly. "Sam—I know this is the worst thing I have ever done, but I can't face the thought of prison. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. Tod"

Fletcher handed the evidence bag back to Connie. "Check it for prints and have a handwriting expert look it over. Has Sam Baxter seen it?"

She nodded. "He called nine-one-one as soon as Tod phoned him. The patrol car got here just before he did and I was right behind them. Tod was considerate. He'd left the door unlocked for us."

"Did the people downstairs hear anything?"

"They go away every Friday for the weekend. Sam Baxter thinks they have a place in the country."

Fletcher went out on the landing to speak with the dead man's brother. "I understand he phoned you before it happened, Mr. Baxter?"

"I—yes. I'm sorry, it's a terrible shock."

"Just what did he say?"

"*Goodbye, Sam.* That's all he said. *Goodbye, Sam.* Then there was this loud noise just as the connection was broken. I couldn't believe my ears! I called nine-one-one and got dressed and hurried right over. I prayed all the way that it wasn't what I thought, but—"

"Are you certain it was your brother's voice? If he only said two words it might have been someone imitating him."

"What?" Fletcher's words seemed to have confused him. "Well, it certainly sounded like Tod. As soon as I heard the voice I thought it was him."

"It just seems odd that he'd have the gun in one hand and the phone in the other, but I guess it could be done. As he was hanging up the phone with his left hand, he put the gun in his mouth and fired with his right."

Fletcher's graphic words seemed to have upset Sam Baxter even further. "You'll have to excuse me, Captain. I need some air." He hurried down the stairs to the street.

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Connie came over to Fletcher. "Go a little easy on the guy, Captain. He just lost his brother."

"I didn't realize—"

"I know you didn't. You were just thinking out loud."

"Yeah." He knew he wasn't as smooth as Leopold would have been. Maybe he never would be.

On Monday morning the reports were on Fletcher's desk. The dead man's fingerprints had been on the revolver and the liquor glass, the note and the telephone. Left-hand prints on the phone, right-hand on the glass and gun. Nitrate particles in the victim's hand showed that he'd fired the weapon. And a handwriting expert had verified without doubt that Tod Baxter wrote the suicide note to his brother.

The case was closed, or would be after Fletcher spoke with Marcy McGregor. She arrived at his office later that morning. "Sorry to get you down here, Mrs. McGregor. How's your husband doing?"

"Much better, thanks. The doctor says he's out of danger and they've moved him to a private room."

"I'm glad to hear that. You know about Tod Baxter's suicide, of course."

"It was in the papers."

"That's why I asked Sergeant Trent to phone you. I just have a couple of questions. Did you have any contact with Baxter between the time your husband was shot and the suicide?"

"None whatever."

"Not by phone or in person?"

"No. I had nothing to do with him after he shot Charlie. In fact, I'd broken off with him before that, which was why he came to the house that Saturday."

"Did he send you any sort of note hinting at suicide?"

"No."

"The autopsy report shows a large amount of alcohol in the body at the time of death. Was he a heavy drinker?"

"Not especially, but I suppose if someone's on the verge of killing himself it wouldn't be unusual to have a few drinks."

He couldn't argue with that. "One more question and I'll let you go. Baxter used one handgun to shoot your husband and another to take his own life. Any idea where they came from? Both were unlicensed."

She shook her head. "He never mentioned guns to me."

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"You were at his apartment from time to time?"

Marcy shifted nervously in the chair. "Well, yes. A couple of times."

"Did you ever see a gun?"

"Never. He never mentioned them and I never saw them."

Fletcher put down his pencil. "Thank you for coming in, Mrs. McGregor. I hope your husband continues to improve."

"You can't believe the weight that's been taken off my shoulders. I kept imagining Tod would pop out from behind a tree some night and try to kidnap me."

"I'm glad it didn't come to that."

After she departed, he sat staring at the open case file on the desk in front of him. Open and shut.

Still, he wondered about the gun. It was a loose end.

He picked up the phone and dialed the number of Grace Smiley's home. There was no answer, so he tried the other number he had for her, the office of the cosmetics firm. After a few moments' wait she came on the line.

"Ms. Smiley," he said after identifying himself, "I'm wondering about this pistol your ex-husband used to kill himself. He used an unlicensed Beretta to shoot Charlie McGregor, and now an unlicensed Smith and Wesson to kill himself. Do you have any idea where he obtained those weapons?"

"I suppose they're the ones he got in Vegas. We went out there for our first anniversary. He was roaming around downtown one afternoon and saw some guns in a pawnshop window. He bought two of them and brought them home in his luggage. He never bothered to register them, and I never saw them again."

"All right," Fletcher said. "I just wanted to clear up that point. Thanks for your trouble."

When he hung up he was satisfied for the first time. He called Connie in and handed her the file on the McGregor shooting and Baxter's suicide. "Case closed, Connie. File it away."

She took the file and flipped through it. "This one was a first for me. I never had a suicide where the victim clenched his teeth while shooting himself in the mouth. They always practically swallow the barrel before they pull the trigger."

"Yeah. All it did was blow out his two front teeth."

When Connie left he went back to the day's paperwork. She was right, of course. Suicides shoved the gun into their mouth. Otherwise they shot themselves in the temple. Still . . .

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He remembered Baxter's gap-toothed grin from one of the newspaper photos. He punched Connie's number and got her on the phone. "Connie, does the McGregor file include Tod Baxter's mug shots from when he was arrested?"

"No, but I can get them easily enough."

"Do that. And bring the file back in too."

What was it? What was he looking for? He didn't really know. For an instant he wished Leopold was back.

"Here it is," Connie announced, placing the mug shots on his desk.

Of course Tod Baxter wasn't smiling in the mug shots. The gap between his front teeth didn't show. Fletcher cursed silently and took out the autopsy photos. Death certainly did change a person's appearance.

"Connie!"

"What is it?"

"Look at the ears in these pictures!"

She studied them for a moment. "They're different."

"Damn right they're different! And the shape of a person's ear certainly doesn't change after death."

"What are you saying? The fingerprints all matched."

"The fingerprints on the gun, glass, and telephone all matched those of the deceased. Did anyone check them against Baxter's prints from when he was arrested?"

"Why should we? He was in Baxter's apartment, wearing Baxter's clothes, looking like Baxter. There was no doubt of his identity."

"There's doubt now. Have them run a check right away."

She was back in fifteen minutes. "They don't match," she announced somberly.

"Get a patrol car out to Marcy McGregor's house right away, and another to the hospital. Tod Baxter is still alive."

Fletcher phoned Leopold's home that evening, just after dinner. When Molly answered, he asked if he could come over. "Sure, he'd be glad to see you," she replied. "We're just sitting on the veranda watching the sunset."

He was there in twenty minutes, carrying a briefcase with the case file, mug shots, fingerprint records, and various bits of evidence. "It's good to see you," Leopold said. "What is this, a new case?"

"The McGregor one. Open and shut, except for one thing. The man who shot himself wasn't Tod McGregor."

Leopold frowned. "An unknown twin brother?"

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"I'd better start at the beginning. It's suddenly become a very interesting case, far from routine." As Fletcher spoke he laid out the various files and photos for Leopold's inspection. "See the ears?" he asked at one point.

"The ears, yes." Leopold was warming to the subject. "An early method of criminal identification, predating fingerprints."

Fletcher went on, covering everything he could remember that was connected with the case. "To answer your earlier question, the dead man's not an unknown twin brother. We think it's a homeless man known as Pete Detroit."

Leopold smiled, pleased. "You've been busy."

"I decided that Tod Baxter was a fairly ordinary-looking person. Average height and weight, no startling facial features. Someone with the right color hair and eyes might be mistaken for him, especially after death. Since no one was reported missing after the so-called suicide, I figured if the body wasn't Baxter it might be some homeless drifter, like the ones who sleep under the Broad Street bridge every night. We took Baxter's mug shot and retouched it a little, covering the ears. The teeth didn't show, so that was no problem. Connie sent a couple of men up to the area of the bridge to show the picture around. Two people mentioned a man they call Pete Detroit who hasn't been seen lately. Near as we can tell, he disappeared just before Baxter's suicide."

"That's good work. How do you think it was done?"

"Chances are that Tod Baxter had run into this guy and noticed the resemblance. When he decided to fake his own suicide, he sought out Pete Detroit and brought him to his apartment. Maybe he let him take a shower and get dressed in some of his clothes. Then he got him drunk and killed him, making sure the bullet shattered those front teeth so nobody would notice they lacked that distinctive gap. Tod got him to leave fingerprints all over before he killed him. It had to be Tod, of course, because the fake suicide note was in his handwriting."

"Where is he now?"

Fletcher frowned and shook his head. "I don't know, Captain. It would help a lot to have him back in custody before we announce this thing to the press. I've got a hunch he's not far away. Somebody might be hiding him."

"Who?"

"Well, there are three likely suspects—his brother Sam has always been very close to him, as much a father as an older brother.

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Marcy McGregor was having an affair with him, and her reconciliation with her wounded husband could be just an act. Since her husband is still in the hospital, Tod could even be hiding at her house. The third possibility would be his ex-wife, Grace Smiley. Who knows? Maybe they're back together again."

"Which possibility do you like?" Leopold asked.

"None of them," Fletcher admitted. "I guess that's why I came to you."

"It perks me up, getting the brain functioning again. There are times, Captain Fletcher, when hunches pay off. But they can never take the place of good hard evidence."

"Then you know—?"

"I know some things, not everything. Let's just say I know the most important thing. Come, let's go for a ride."

"Are you going out?" Molly called from the other room.

"Just for a bit. Fletcher and I are going for a ride."

They headed back into the city, with Fletcher following Leopold's directions, and before long he realized they were headed for Sam Baxter's house. When they pulled up in front, the ground floor was brightly lit. Rose Baxter came to the door, surprised to see them. "Oh! It's Captain Fletcher, isn't it?"

"We need to see your husband," Leopold said.

As if on cue, Sam Baxter appeared behind her. "What's this all about?"

Leopold pointed his finger. "There's your man, Fletcher. Arrest him!"

"As his brother's accomplice?"

"No, no! You had the wrong motive and therefore the wrong murderer. Tod probably knows nothing about this. Sam Baxter killed that homeless man."

Later, as Leopold explained it all down at the squad room, it seemed like old times. Connie Trent was there, and a couple of the others on the night shift. Everyone was feeling good.

"It was a difficult case, full of ambiguities," he began. "Coming into it late, I had to rely upon the very accurate description of events furnished by Captain Fletcher, along with the photos and documents. There were two things—clues, if you will—that set me on the right track. The suicide note and the two guns."

Fletcher pulled the note from the file on his desk. "Here it is."

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"And I'm sure the dead man's fingerprints were on that too, just like on the phone and the gun. It's not too difficult to place a gun in the hand of a drunk or unconscious man, cover it with your hand, place it against his front teeth, and pull the trigger. It even leaves the proper nitrate marks on the victim's hand, as you discovered. But look again at this note. It was found flat on the table as you see it, and yet there's a fold in it. Why?"

"Maybe he folded it and then changed his mind," Connie reasoned. "He was drunk, after all."

"Ah, but you're confusing the real Tod Baxter with the dead man, whom we'll call by the unlikely name of Pete Detroit. It was Detroit who was drunk, but Detroit certainly didn't write the note. And if you'll read the note again, you'll see that it really makes no mention of suicide: *Sam—I know this is the worst thing I have ever done, but I can't face the thought of prison. I hope you'll find it in your heart to forgive me. Tod* This is brother talking to brother, remember. The worst thing Tod has ever done is to jump bail and leave Sam Baxter responsible for a half-million dollars. He begs forgiveness, but not in person. The note was folded because he mailed it to Sam."

"You mentioned the wrong motive," Fletcher remembered.

"Of course! When you discovered the dead man wasn't Tod Baxter, you immediately suspected Tod of the killing. But it was Sam who remembered the man who looked like his brother, Sam who sought him out, lured him to Tod's apartment, got him drunk, and killed him. Sam had put up his lumber business to guarantee Tod's bail, and now Tod was gone. Sam could lose everything unless he could convince the authorities that Tod was dead. In something like a fire or a car crash there are always fingerprints and dental records to check. By doing it with a gunshot in Tod's own apartment, he hoped no one would feel the need to check those things. The gunshot took care of the missing gap in the teeth, and he figured no one would notice the difference in ears. Maybe he even cut Pete Detroit's hair a little, or shaved him."

"You mentioned the other clue being connected with the guns."

Leopold nodded. "Of course if the note was mailed or delivered to Sam Baxter at an earlier time, he must have been responsible for the killing. Once he discovered the true meaning of the note—maybe there was a travel folder or something enclosed with it—he set about trying to save his money and his business. One of the things you told me, Fletcher, was that the brothers were close and often exchanged gifts. Grace Smiley told you Tod bought two guns in Las

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Vegas. He used one attempting to kill Charlie McGregor, but what about the other gun? It wasn't at his apartment because you searched the place after his arrest. Surely you would have found a second gun. If he didn't keep it, what did Tod do with it? The most likely answer is that he bought it as a gift for his brother. And that was the weapon Sam used to kill the homeless man. Both the note and the gun pointed to Sam Baxter."

"What about the missing Tod?" Connie asked.

Leopold shrugged. "We may never know. He could be anywhere by now."

As it turned out, he was in Taos, New Mexico. Four days later, when he read about his brother's arrest in a newspaper and realized the full consequences of his bail-jumping, he surrendered to local police.

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One of the most notable features of Judy Koretsky's stories is the vivid depiction of setting. Nowhere is this more apparent than in this new piece, in which she brings her background so thoroughly to life she seems to have created a painting with words. . . .

THE TORMENTING EYE OF GOD

by LEA CASH-DOMINGO

Strand held the grinder as it spun the coffee beans to the consistency of sand. In the midst of the dark brown whirlwind the rotating silver blades, one moment bright and the next buried, reminded him of the way wind could whip into a velocity and spin sand over a car, mummifying it. It reminded him, too, of desert storms, always bearing the promise of rain, tearing up the sky with violent shocks. The promise of rain was a tortured waiting: you'd feel the air swell with dampness, ache in your soul for deliverance, but the rain would not come.

He told himself that it did no good to hope, that that kind of hope could only make him crazy with waiting. He imagined instead the pleasure of riding his motorbike, the speed and the dust that got stirred up when he'd ride over the cracked Arizona land at fifty or sixty miles an hour, skirting between Joshua trees like a scorpion between rocks. He was savoring the thought of absolute freedom when his neighbor from the next house half a mile up the road pushed open the front door, stamped inside his kitchen, and sat down.

Despite the tattoos of snakes on his muscled biker's arms, Gus's scraggly beard and unkempt sandy hair reminded Strand of a broken man. They were all broken in one way or another, but the look of it always agitated Strand.

"What's up?" Strand asked as he took a pan off a two-burner stove and poured boiling water into the coffee filter.

"Cops called. There's a lost woman out there."

Strand tensed. He had a reputation for finding people who were lost, or given up for dead. Twice the desert patrol had asked for his help. Twice he'd found them—the kid, the drunk.

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"Passing car saw her with a man, said the man went crazy with a gun, shot up his car. Cops said when they found it, it had exploded."

Strand pictured agonizing metal as it tore from the chassis and spiraled like limbs into the air. "What happened to the man?"

"He shot himself. The cops figure she's out there alone."

Strand took a hat and walked outside into the glaring sunlight. Already at eight in the morning the sun was unforgiving. Like a tormenting eye of God, it burned down on him, into his soul where he stored a lifetime of secrets and sins. The heat filled him with an expectation of restless turbulence, as if the tedious distant gullies of rugged sand before him hid an unwelcome jolt. When he came to a cholla cactus with its vicious silvery-yellow spines, he turned back toward his house.

Sunlight reflected off the tin roof. He lowered his gaze to where Gus stood and saw what others no doubt saw in himself—another lonely, broken-down man who had fled L.A. to anonymity.

"What direction?" he shouted.

"The cops aren't sure," Gus shouted back. "They sent out two 'copters, but they can't find her."

The wind swept across the parched ground, scattering bits of rock. Strand stared at the sand as if to spy the woman it hid, but all he could see were rolling hills.

The first time, when he had gone looking for the missing kid, he'd gone out of self-protection more than concern. He didn't want the law to wind up tracking him and come crawling onto his porch with sirens and guns to arrest him. The kid had wandered from a camper, no one was sure why. In spite of himself, Strand had wound up caring more deeply about the kid than he thought he could for someone else's child. Strand was half mad at the time, with delusions of finding his own boy, who had died two years before in his automobile. He'd cried for days after he found the lost boy, cried because he hadn't gotten to him soon enough.

You couldn't be in the desert at a worse time of day, around noon when the sun became a floodlight, searing in its white heat. Worst time of year too, August, when feverish days stretched into eternity.

He went back inside and poured two cups of coffee. If the 'copters couldn't find this woman, it meant she had run for cover, which meant she'd headed for the mountains and probably the caves. The caves were a labyrinth of slot canyons and caverns with false beginnings and deadly endings where trails led to sheer drops over the slickrock. Desert patrol cops wouldn't follow her there, if they could

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help it. Even if they found her, there was no guarantee they'd get out alive.

"You think you know where she is, don't you?" Gus asked.

"I think so." He sipped his coffee and spread out a faded, badly creased map, and pointed to a spot. "Ten to one she's in the caves."

Strand felt Gus watch him as he gathered his belongings—binoculars, rope, down bag, canteen, nuts and dried fruit, matches, and firewood.

Gus cleared his throat. "Aren't you afraid?"

Strand studied Gus curiously and shook his head. He had no fear, hadn't had any for a long time. He'd conquered his fear with anger. His anger was a consuming madness which when he had first settled here and scouted out the land, he tried to quench by trekking into the desolate sandscape. He prayed then that the desert would take him. But every time he went into it, the treks somehow made him stronger, tougher.

He ate breakfast, made conversation with Gus, then, having strapped on his backpack, headed out onto the parched land that neither took his imprint nor absorbed his footfall.

"Look after the place, will you?" he asked from a hundred yards or so, and knew Gus would.

Water lines surrounding the sun like crow's feet on a woman's face quivered. The way the heat bore down on him like some heavy swollen thing reminded him of the search for the child. That too was done during the day. That too wore him out with expectation.

You didn't wind up in the desert by accident. You had to walk into it, away from the familiar, toward the mountains, away from a human landscape. A woman might get abandoned in the desert, but not a child. A kid wouldn't run out of gas or flee a husband. Strand never figured out how that five-year-old boy wound up in such a godforsaken place.

This woman, he thought: did she know the man was dead? She wouldn't leave her refuge if she thought the man was looking for her. Maybe she couldn't leave. Maybe she was dead, or heat mad. Heat, if you stayed in it long enough, could give you a stroke the way drink or madness might.

The sun's rays angled now at a forty-five-degree slant. He walked into the light and for several blinding seconds was unsure where he was. There was brightness all around, then an explosion of sound and metal, with pieces flying through the air. He could practically

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hear the sizzling air and see the burning car, as though he had run from it only moments ago.

Then he stepped into utter quiet, and the peace of the desert consumed him. There was no wind. No shadow. Nothing.

You thought you were all spent, burned out, hollowed out by the echoing boom. You thought the desert would swallow you up into its whale-big belly and with that swallow you'd lose sensation. You thought it over and over until the hope of it became one big colorless wave of sand. Until you began a new search. Then something threatened to snap. The sun caught hold somehow like a cougar seizing a lizard between its teeth.

Strand walked in what seemed like the endless suspension of another man's dream. The shifting mounds dipped into crevices and the crevices spread out like huge fingers riddled with parched veins.

The sun inched over the horizon, taking with it the intensity of the day, leaving behind a rosy trail. The sun held the earth taut and as the soil glowed in deepest orange, the sun finally dropped into oblivion and shadows sprang from the earth.

Shots like cannons fired in his mind. Heads rolled back and eyes, wide open and instantly tormented, snapped a landscape of windshield and freeway concrete looming overhead like wild Medusan snakes. He could see himself running from the car, from the terrible death vision, screaming as behind him metal exploded and sent a world—his world—scattering into the air.

He camped behind a mammoth rock where he built a fire and watched the flames, letting himself be drawn into them. In the flames he reassembled the fragments of the memories—his child, his woman.

He stared at the fabric of the night. Deepest night released him as it always did, allowing him to become somehow free of himself, to become truly deserted. He fell into sleep as if into a vacancy.

In the morning, while it was barely light, he gathered his belongings and moved east toward the mountains. A slow wind ruffled his shirt and dried his eyes and nose. He thought about a morning in Los Angeles when he rose, went to a window, and gazed below to a stretch of green hillside. He could almost feel the soft carpet beneath his toes as he padded into the bathroom to shower, and could feel the damp heat as his skin absorbed it.

He closed mental blinds on the memory. In the barely orange daylight, he saw footprints that traversed themselves like a crazed animal. Were these the prints of the woman he sought? Once in-

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stinct was lost, had desperation taken over? He followed the footprints, backward and forward, toward a descending trail and away from it.

It would have been nightfall. The woman's instincts would have told her to get to higher ground, not to submit to a descent. She would have feared being cornered, but when night came swiftly, as it did in the desert, she would have crept down the trail and into the eventual and only shelter there.

The trail led through an opening in the earth. Strand stepped into it and found himself inside a tunnel that snaked and spiraled downward. The slickrock was slippery and he had to walk slowly to avoid a sudden, and dangerous, slip. At an intersection he debated which way to go. Instinct told him the woman would have tried to elude her imagined pursuer by seeking the highest ground farthest away from the entrance. He chanced the left fork, which seemed to rise slightly in altitude.

The air became damp. He wandered, becoming gradually aware of the moisture, and shined his flashlight on the red cavernous walls. Up a ways, hanging from a ledge overhead, like a misplaced flag, was a rip of white brocade. The woman would not have left it there intentionally. She had probably sensed the dampness and scrambled for the ledge, hauling herself over, hurtling herself into a cave or whatever lay beyond. He raised himself onto the ledge. Below was a sheer drop of about twenty feet to an inky dark pool.

Strand studied the angle of the walls and their sheer rock face and spied out the nicks where a higher water level had scarred the rock. The pool below was maybe a foot deep, maybe thirty feet deep. The woman would've felt the sheer rock with her hands and backed away, perhaps falling from the ledge, catching her clothing on a small protrusion of rock.

He climbed down and returned to the intersection. From this angle the trail he'd come down seemed lower. He took the artery directly opposite and with his hands and sight memorized the petroglyphs and the particular intrusions in the rock.

The trail meandered up and down, opening onto crawl spaces and rooms of green and blue walls. The path finally dropped into a ceilingless recess where a frantic wind dumped sand as it whistled downward.

Strand sensed her long before he saw her. The muscles across his chest tightened unbearably as he thought he must be too late. He remembered the search for the child, that it had taken him days to

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locate the boy, and when he did the horror he confronted shocked him. The boy's face had been chewed away by scavengers like a side of meat.

Up close, he saw the wind had done its work: it had blown sand over her entire body. He bent down and wiped it away from her face. He freed the eyelids first, then the broad nose, then the lips. Her skin was yellowish beneath the dust. Her hair was dark brown, the color of coffee churning in a grinder.

Her eyelids fluttered open like moth wings. Blue eyes flew out of the past at him. Strand jerked back, startled. You couldn't look into a pair of eyes and see the dead. It wasn't possible.

He felt for her pulse. It fluttered faintly under the skin. He pressed harder and her pulse quickened. Wings flapping rapidly against a windowpane echoed in his eardrums. In another room, in another time, he had caught a trapped bird between his hands and released it through an open window. The mental blinds flew up. Light footsteps on distant stairs like pitter-patter and a bouncing ball moved in quick succession across the floorboards. Strand was standing at a window, seeing reflected in the glass his son's playfulness, as he watched the bird fly away.

His son's small vibrating hands reached for him. The lithe graceful body was extinguished by the sun's sudden brightness. You couldn't hang onto the image for long, even if you wanted to. The moment played with you, escaped, and haunted your mind like an incomplete echo.

Strand took the woman's hands in his and pressed them gently, as if to warm life back into them. Then he unscrewed the cap off the canteen, poured a handful of water, and cupped his hand to her lips. The dust melted off them.

"I'm so glad you came." Her voice cracked.

He sat beside her, cradled her shoulders and eased her face against his chest, and fed her the way he had fed his son when his son was an infant. You had to be careful with the weak. You had to make sure you didn't give them too much too fast. Like watering a nearly dead plant too long could kill it.

"Did you know the man in the car is dead?" Strand asked.

"No." She closed her eyes and sighed. "Did the police . . ."

"He shot himself."

Her blue gaze enveloped him.

"You're lucky to be alive," he said. "What's your name?"

"Flora."

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Flower. Desert flower. Late bloom. "It's easy to get lost in these caves, especially at night."

She sat up, brushed one palm against the other, and stared at the opening in the rock. "I thought he was going to kill me. He threatened to."

Harsh sound like the backfiring of a car volleyed through the air. Pop, pop, pop: a report of sudden violence burst from the front to the backseat. Laura's stunned face burst, Joshua scrambled for cover and caught the next round accidentally in the back, and lurched. For a split second Joshua's neck twisted like whipcord, then his small body crumpled. Strand's own body jerked toward Joshua, then toward Laura, reeled with the impact. His child. His woman.

"I thought he was going to kill me" volleyed through the space between the woman and Strand and struck him like sandblast.

You could go through the same thing time and again, crossing the threshold between love and regret, between belonging and separation, between hate and loss. You could play it and replay it, but you couldn't change it. Couldn't undo it.

"He was jealous," she said. "He thought I was seeing other men. He didn't know he was the only one, and I didn't know how to make him believe it."

Tears flew into Strand's eyes and dried instantly. This woman had already forgiven the man.

He let her lean against him as he helped her up the path back into the labyrinth. She was lighter than he expected, a child's weight almost.

"Where're you from?" he asked her.

"Phoenix. I left my job to go to school. I was assigned a male advisor, whom I talked to nearly every week my first year. That's how it all started."

Strand thought of the afternoon when he discovered the stranger in bed with his woman. He thought of his son, who came into that room, who clung to his legs, and who cried. A spasm shot through him, and for a moment he thought the ground beneath him was seized in a tremor. With effort he pressed the tremor deep inside himself.

For what seemed an eternity they went in circles, before they stumbled into a deep cavern. He felt with his hands in the darkest paths, shined his light on the landmarks he had committed to memory. When they emerged from the cool damp air of the earth sometime later, they stepped uncertainly into searing bright sunlight.

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The arid landscape that confronted Strand's view overwhelmed him. He was seized by a momentary urge to retrace his steps back to the labyrinth and hole up there, to wait for help to come to him. But he was beyond redemption. No one—not the desert patrol nor Gus—would chance the risks. Only the scavengers would come, waiting for weakness to set in, waiting for the moment to attack. He took a determined breath and steered the woman by the elbow into the beige wilderness of sandy mounds and parched gullies.

The sun hammered down on them. Strand wiped beads of sweat off his face and neck. The air seemed to contract, and despite frequent sips of water, his throat became dry. His backpack felt unusually heavy. Every now and again he looked behind them to gauge the distance they had traveled, but all he saw were rounded waves of cement-hard sand as far as the eye could see. He couldn't tell whether they were farther from the caves or nearer to the mammoth rock. He couldn't tell whether they were moving away or toward anything. The sand was relentless, expansive, continuous.

The woman talked about a succession of miscarriages and about wanting to go home to her mother, chattering on and on as if to inventory her life, until Strand wished she would run out of words so he could hear himself think. She stirred up thoughts in him of his real mother, whom he had never known, and of his foster mother, who was an honest, hard-working woman but who had wanted a child who could take care of himself. He found himself remembering that he could never again go home, that there was no home to go to.

He remembered his anger that had left him cold for days, that had spurred his plan to kill. He remembered Laura's relief at thinking he had forgiven her, remembered her willingness to do whatever he wanted, even to go for the drive to the country that was to be her last. He remembered his son, who threw himself in front of his mother as though to shield her from the bullets and who wound up taking the bullets.

When night came, he carved a hole in a mound and placed the sleeping bag inside, over them. He let himself be held as his emotion, stronger than the surging anger that had once possessed him, wracked about inside him, seeking escape. He tried to cry, but couldn't find the release, or relief.

Later, when the woman was asleep, he stared out at the sky. It was enormous and cold. He thought how the chill could kill them, and he knew he was afraid.

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He lay awake watching the night sky until it softened and blended into a powder-blue light. When the woman stirred, it was Laura's breath he remembered; when the woman positioned herself on her side and looked at him, it was Laura's face he saw, Laura's sapphire-blue eyes and coffee-brown, wavy hair.

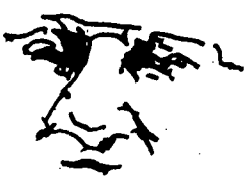
The new day was more humid than usual. The sky clouded over, and in the distance the sky rumbled. Strand prayed it would rain. He wanted relief, in any form. For hours the oppressive dampness hung in the air, irritating Strand, making him impatient, restless. The clap and roar of thunder sounded again and again; a lightning bolt split the sky with an electric whiteness that pained Strand in its intensity. Flashes in quick succession tore up the sky until he could no longer stand to watch.

For an instant there was no movement, then suddenly water was everywhere. Water rose from the ground and transformed nearby ravines into gushing rivers that spilled and crashed over hills of sand. The flash flood became frenzied, until it seemed the water was boiling and spitting up mud.

Strand sank to his knees into a warm bath and wrapped his arms tightly around Flora's legs, and sobbed. The anguish flowed out of his body, turning numb anger to a prickling, tingling sensation that drained him, leaving only a sorptive sadness.

He did not remember when the flood stopped, nor how long he and Flora walked, nor for how long a chill, piercing wind whipped at their damp clothing before they stumbled into the shelter of his home. He only knew that as he felt a warm wet cloth washing his eyes, his nose, his mouth, he had reached for Gus as though for the memory of the man he himself once was.

He lifted his eyelids and in the light he saw the woman whose skin was like orange-pink sandstone and whose hair was like fresh-ground coffee, and saw that she forgave him.



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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The mystery short story, like the Broadway theatre, is constantly subjected to premature burial by pessimistic analysts. No reader of this magazine needs to be reassured that the short form is in good shape, and added evidence comes in two recent best-of-the-year anthologies, one from a venerable series that has had a nearly unbroken run since 1946, the other a formidable newcomer.

The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1992 (Walker, $21.95), edited by Edward D. Hoch, is the latest in the series originally published by Dutton under the title *Best Detective Stories of the Year*. The annual has had five editors, David C. Cooke, Brett Halliday, Anthony Boucher, and Allen J. Hubin having preceded Hoch. The collection is always worth reading, but this entry, gathering a dozen stories first published in the U.S. in 1991, struck me as unusually strong.

The award recipients present leave no doubt they were deserving—I'd hate to have to choose an overall winner from among them. Wendy Hornsby's fine "Nine Sons" (Edgar) and Peter Robinson's equally impressive "Innocence" (Crime Writers of Canada Arthur Ellis Award) share a haunting and subtle ambiguity, offering hints of what is going on but requiring the reader to make the final connections. Peter Lovesey's "The Crime of Miss Oyster Brown" (*EQMM* Readers Award), less dark and more playful and ironic, is a masterpiece of construction. Certainly in a league with this trio is Carolyn Wheat's extraordinary "Ghost Station," the emotionally-charged tale of New York transit cop Maureen Gallagher's return to the job after treatment for alcoholism.

Editor Hoch uses the term "novels in miniature" to describe some of the stories of Doug Allyn, whose Edgar-nominated "Sleeper" is one of three *EQMM* tales included. The same term could, of course, apply to the fully cast, fully clued whodunits Hoch himself contributes to these pages each month. "The Problem of the Grange Hall" is a splendid example, a typically tricky and scrupulously fair impossible-crime problem for Dr. Sam Hawthorne. Another series sleuth in good form is Bill Pronzini's "Nameless" in "La Bellezza Delle Bellezze," which combines a typically good puzzle plot with a richly detailed picture of San Francisco's Italian-American community. (This story is expanded, or in Raymond Chandler's term cannibalized, in Pronzini's latest novel, *Epitaphs* (Delacorte, $19).) Others represented are Lawrence Block, Brendan DuBois, Stuart M. Kaminsky, Barry N. Malzberg, and Ruth Rendell. There isn't a weak story in

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the lot.

Equally impressive is a similarly titled compilation from the editors of *Mystery Scene* magazine, *The Year's 25 Finest Crime and Mystery Stories* (Carroll & Graf, $21), the year in this case being 1990. Eleven of the stories are drawn from *EQMM*; with another eleven from original anthologies and three from other magazines. The editors take a broad view of the field and cast their nets wide. Among the unusual items are "Incident On and Off a Mountain Road," an over-the-top-and-in-your-face EC-comics-style horror tale by Joe R. Lansdale, who could be termed the Howard Stern of popular fiction: immensely talented and inventive but definitely not for every taste. Also out of the normal run is Kristine Kathryn Rusch's excellent time-travel detective story "A Time for Every Purpose," drawn from the venerable science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*. In Lawrence Block's offbeat and thoughtful "Batman's Helpers," private eye Matt Scudder addresses an offense rarely considered in crime fiction: trademark infringement. Many other series characters are present, including the big three of the female private eye (Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski, Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone) plus Pronzini's Nameless, Max Allan Collins's professional assassin Quarry (still not a nice person), Jeremiah Healy's John Francis Cuddy, and John Lutz's Fred Carver. The volume also has my own review of the mystery in 1990 and 1991.

Also showing the vitality of the mystery short story are the healthy number of single-author collections being published, including two to kick off 1993 by women better known for their novel-length work. *** Antonia Fraser: *Jemima Shore at the Sunny Grave,* Bantam, $19.95. The author's second collection has nine entries, four of them about TV journalist Shore, a character I for one prefer at this shorter length. Fraser's tales are deftly written and especially strong on atmosphere. While some writers' crime and mystery stories are about money or power, Fraser's (at least on the evidence of this volume) are almost always about sex. *** Jennifer Rowe: *Death in Store,* Doubleday/Crime Club, $17. Most of these eight tales about amateur sleuth Verity Birdwood are densely enough plotted to be novels, and Rowe's way with characters and clues justify the tag "the Australian Agatha Christie." In fact, Christie didn't always have this much to offer in her own short stories. The title novelette, a criminous variation on *Miracle on 34th Street* that makes good use of its department-store background, is especially strong. **** John Lutz: *Spark,* Holt, $19.95. Florida private eye Fred Carver is asked by Hattie Evans, a resident of the Solartown retirement community, to look into the recent heart-attack death of her husband—he had seemed to be in good health, and anonymous notes suggest his demise was no accident.

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With a clever scam at the center of the plot and Lutz's typically eloquent prose giving freshness to scenes of action, sex, and torture, this is one of the best in an outstanding series.

*** James Yaffe: *Mom Among the Liars,* St. Martin's, $17.95. The fourth book-length case for ex-New York cop Dave, now investigator for the Mesa Grande, Colorado, public defender's office, and his Mom, the Jewish-Mother-as-Great-Detective, is another winner. Mom first appeared in this magazine forty years ago, and her cases continue to recall the great days of Ellery Queen. A Korean madam's murder, of which a homeless intellectual has been accused, is resolved with the usual Queenian linking of fairly showcased clues and topped with an equally Queenian final surprise. The liars of the title are politicians, specifically those running for the office of district attorney, and the voting-booth decisions of Mom and Dave carry an interesting and arguable political message.

** A.E. Eddenden: *Murder on the Thirteenth,* Academy Chicago, $20. In his second case, small-town Canadian cop Inspector Albert Tretheway investigates a series of mysterious deaths, each committed on the thirteenth of the month and involving suggestions of witchcraft. If you're a fully-immersed mystery fan, you can probably make a list of writers you don't really think are first-rate but whose work you enjoy anyway. Eddenden is a recent addition to my list, for his nostalgic evocation of the World War II homefront and his unapologetic embrace of the most artificial kind of Golden Age-style puzzle. (For a book of less than 160 pages, however, the price tag gives pause.)

** Patricia D. Cornwell: *All That Remains,* Scribners, $20. In her third case, Virginia medical examiner Dr. Kay Scarpetta confronts an unusual and tantalizing problem: serial killings of couples, whose decomposed bodies are found months after they initially disappear, with the killer's trademark jack of hearts to link them. Bestselling mystery writers come in at least three categories: those of such superior quality they clearly deserve the distinction (e.g., Francis, Hillerman, le Carré, James, Grafton, Whitney); those who are undoubtedly capable but no better than any number of less successful writers (e.g., Robert B. Parker, Elizabeth George, Lilian Jackson Braun, Mary Higgins Clark); and those who write so badly you can't imagine any literate person wanting to read them (provide your own examples). Cornwell belongs in the middle category. Her novel is reasonably well constructed, competently if rather flatly written, and undeniably packed with interesting specialized detail. Still, I found little to explain the high reputation the series enjoys.

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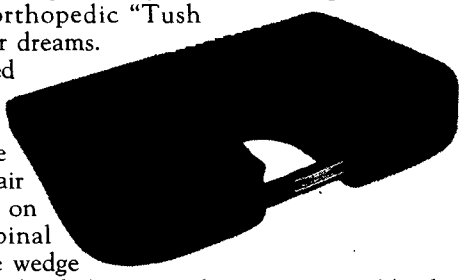

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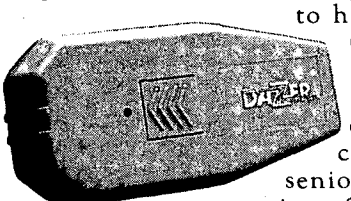

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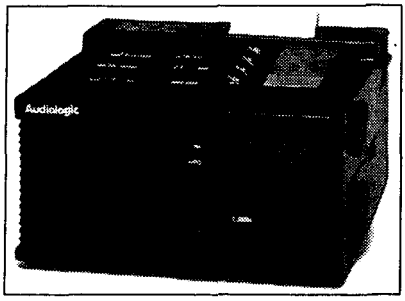
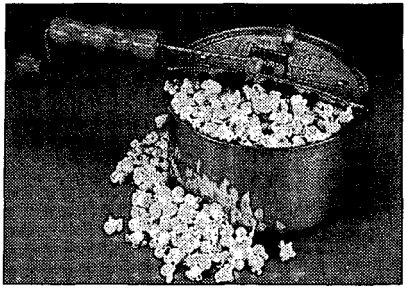


Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audio Logic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the Sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! $89.98 ($6.95) #A2000

GOURMET POPCORN POPPER



The incredible Theater II through-the handle, bottom-stirring popcorn popper uses stovetop power to reach the same temperature (465°F) as commercial poppers. Popcorn explodes to full expansion, steam damage is el-iminated, a faster finish preserves tenderness, and nearly 100% of the popcorn pops! Result: six quarts of the best popcorn you've ever tasted..in just three minutes start to finish. Faster than most microwaves, Wooden handle for a safe grip, and pops with a minimum amount of oil or butter for delicious diet popcorn. (approximately 500 calories per 6 quart). Produces tender, fluffy, old-fashioned movie theater popcorn in just minutes. Made in USA $27.98 ($5.75) #A1963

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The question of justice is always, necessarily, a concern for the mystery writer. Thus when we come across a story in which justice is not served quite straight up, we have to ask ourselves whether the reader will feel satisfied with the outcome. We're not certain how you'll vote on this one, but we think you'll agree that the dilemma is an interesting one. . . .

SPOUSAL SECRETS

by STEPHEN WASYLYK

The suburban street named Clivedon Terrace was eight blocks long and lined with very expensive stone ranch houses, all with very large backyards—some with gardens, others with swimming pools, and a few with both. On May 31 the homes were occupied by one hundred and twenty-five inhabitants.

Overnight, that number was violently reduced by one.

A tall, long-haired, square-chinned, attractive young woman named Chrissy Snow had been strangled in her bed, her body discovered in the morning by a neighbor with whom she had planned a shopping trip.

The patio doors had been forced. The initial assumption that the crime had been committed during an attempted burglary was in doubt after the police discovered the home was equipped with a fully operative security system, raising all sorts of interesting questions.

To Hardie Keller, retired county detective lieutenant now living in comfort four doors away on his pension and the earnings of a late-blooming artist wife—to which he was entitled, he said, since he'd supported her for thirty years while she practiced—the death was particularly distressing. In a neighborhood featuring its third generation of inhabitants, Chrissy Snow had been the only one below the age of forty who had ever waved and smiled at him. Why, he had no idea, since they'd never spoken. Until the tragedy, he hadn't even known her name.

Which is what he told Sergeant Jake Iberson, bull-necked, ugly, and as reliable as a quartz watch, during the usual house-to-house

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interview. With Jake was a detective named Salter; young, with a golden mane a lion would have envied and muscles that should have been outlawed.

"Then you wouldn't know," said Jake, "that her grandfather is Senator Austin Grove and her mother is Amanda Wilder."

Both very familiar names to anyone capable of reading a newspaper. Amanda, Hardie thought, would have been the very attractive, mature woman he'd seen leaving the Mercedes in front of the house one day, so svelte and sophisticated she made the quarter-million-dollar homes look like low-cost housing.

"You have my sympathy, Jake," he said. "Those two will be on the chief's back."

"Amanda doesn't believe in middlemen, Hardie. She's sitting on mine. As far as she's concerned, her son-in-law did it."

"She should realize he's the first one you'd consider."

"Exactly what I told her, but he was two hundred miles away at a motel in Bedford when we notified him this morning. Another possibility. The woman was nude and the alarm wasn't set. She might have been enjoying someone's company and intended to set it after she let him out, especially since no screams were heard and not much of a struggle took place. Third possibility. Maybe she never set it at all and the house was really broken into through those jimmied patio doors. Stranger things have happened."

He rose. "But Amanda doesn't want to hear about possibilities two and three. Or four, five, six, and seven, if I can come up with that many. One is *it*. Close the book on the guy and hang him. If you hear or think of anything . . ."

Hardie's interest in homicides since he'd retired had been zero, but this was the first that had involved a very pretty woman with long dark hair and a wonderful smile, who always waved at the hawk-nosed, gray-haired little old guy up the street.

"Goes without saying, Jake. I'll also see what Meg has to say when she gets back from the beach house next week, but to be honest, neither of us pays much attention to the neighbors these days."

All too true, but Meg absorbed bits and pieces of information seemingly through osmosis, and he'd spent a lifetime observing, so the neighbors had all been tucked nicely away into niches. The husband, now—Howard. Neither had thought much of him, a conclusion based primarily on his haircut, the clothes he wore, and an immature tendency to screech the wheels of his red Porsche every

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time he took off, his car phone clamped to his ear like a permanent fixture.

The door chimes rippled the next morning as he was finishing breakfast.

Carefully coiffed hair, square jaw, regal bearing. High heels, good legs, designer suit, and gold earrings. No cosmetic surgeon had ever made a dime from her. Poise. Elegance. Wow. Even at her age she could be considered more attractive than her daughter.

The deep grief in the blue eyes jolted him. "Lieutenant Keller, I'm—"

"Amanda Wilder. What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to talk to you. About—"

He held the door wide. "Please. Join me for coffee."

Like a waiter seating a patron, he held a chair for her at the kitchen table, poured the coffee, and joined her. He doubted that she'd ever before in her life sat at a kitchen table and sipped coffee from a mug marked with the sign of Sagittarius. She was definitely sterling silver and porcelain, like Meg.

"I've met your wife," she said.

"Sometimes I think everyone has. I'm sorry about your daughter. Meg may have met her. I hadn't, but she always waved as if we were old friends."

She smiled slightly. "You were. Ten years ago, during a series of attacks on teenaged girls, you gave a talk at her school on what the students should be on the alert for and what to do if accosted. She admired the way you handled it. As possible targets, the girls naturally were keyed up and nervous, and you could have frightened them even more, but you gave them confidence in their ability to take care of themselves. You became somewhat of a hero to her. No one was prouder when you caught the man." That sad half-smile came back. "I suppose that at the time she needed a father figure. My husband had died the year before."

Superb control, the grief apparent only in the shadowed eyes. Tears would be shed in private.

"I had no idea. As I said, we never spoke."

"No reason to reveal a teenage admiration, was there? You're retired, I know, but the senator and I agree—" Her lips thinned, hate in the name. "If anyone can prove Howard killed her, you can."

"I understood he was two hundred miles away."

The words were chiseled in ice. "No one else, absolutely no one, had any motive at all."

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"And his?"

"Her money. That was why he married her. Everyone knew it but her. She wouldn't listen when I tried to tell her . . ." She made a little gesture. "You've heard it all before. I expected it to end in divorce with a generous settlement, but the whole pie is better, isn't it?"

"Sergeant Iberson is very competent."

"I'm sure, but . . . we'll pay you, of course."

"I'm not in business and I don't need the money." He toyed with his cup. "And if he turns out to be innocent?"

"Then I'd be wrong, wouldn't I?"

A one-time father figure must have some sort of an obligation to a beautiful young woman who had always smiled and waved.

"I suppose I could ask the sergeant if he can use a little help."

She rose. "I'd be grateful for anything you could do."

After she'd gone, he called Jake.

"I don't want to interfere, but it's hard to say no to a woman like that. Anything more on the son-in-law?"

"I asked the chief in Bedford to look into it because, hell, it's only a three hour drive. He could have come here, killed her, and still been back at the motel when we called with the bad news, which, by the way, didn't reduce him to tears. The chief said Snow has been stopping there every two weeks for almost a year. The manager knows him and his red Porsche and he says the car was there at midnight, which is about when the M.E. says she died. But the chief is no dummy. He checked every agency where he might have rented a car. Nothing."

"Turn up any other suspects at all?"

"Not so far. If she was entertaining someone, we haven't found him yet. But listen, the husband of the woman who discovered the body—"

Meg called her the blond Amazon. The husband was short, dark curly hair, broad shoulders, about fifty.

"The Reynoldses. I never knew the name until yesterday."

"Something about him. I know him, but can't place him. Nothing in the computer. Take a close look. You always had a good memory for faces."

"Does this mean you don't mind if I take a hand?"

"Hardie, I feel for the woman. I really do. People tell me she and her daughter were real close. But the last thing I need is her and the senator complaining to the chief that my feet are dragging.

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Snow's alibi has to be checked. I was going to send Salter, but I'd only lose him for a day and I'm sure nothing he brought back would change her mind. Since she seems to have confidence in you—"

"Aha. Tell you what I'll do. I'll take her along. You'll get a day of peace and she'll feel she's contributing. If the alibi holds, it might convince her she's wrong about him."

"Hardie, if someone wrote a confession in blood, she wouldn't buy it."

He called her. "I'm going to Bedford to ask a few questions about Snow's alibi. Care to come along?"

"I'll pick you up."

She ignored the speed limit, as though what they'd find might disappear before they arrived.

Sitting at the junction of east-west and north-south interstates, Bedford was a collection of service stations, chain motels, car dealerships, and a variety of places to eat along a stretch of highway filled with the never-ending roar of diesel engines.

The chief was named Gelbacht—young, stocky, and thick-necked. He exhibited a genuine warmth when they told him why they were there, taking Amanda's hand and expressing his sympathy. He gave them the names of the people he'd talked to. No objections to their asking their own questions.

Hardie slid into the car. "Nice guy. He could have been one of those ironheads who won't tolerate anyone operating in their area." He cleared his throat. "I'm going to suggest something that might prove you wrong. Snow stopped here every two weeks, supposedly because it was a convenient break in his sales trips. There might have been another attraction—female companionship to fill the lonely hours."

"Knowing him, I wouldn't doubt it, but how would it prove me wrong?"

"If he spent the night with someone, she could confirm his alibi."

"Or she could lie to protect him."

"You're a very stubborn woman."

The square jaw set. *"I know him!"*

Four hours later, he called Jake.

"Give Amanda's instincts an A plus. The alibi didn't hold up. Snow has a girlfriend here, a waitress in the motel restaurant. The dealer's service record on her car shows she drives an average of a hundred and fifty miles a week. She had some work done six days

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ago, which means it should have logged about nine hundred since then. The odometer shows a bit more than thirteen hundred. She lied a little before telling us, yeah, he borrowed her car that night because he suspected his wife was playing around while he was on the road and he wanted to check on her, but he couldn't use the Porsche because it would be too easily recognized."

"*He's* cheating, and the girlfriend buys a story that he wants to check on *his wife?* Small wonder con men rule the world, Hardie. We all believe what we want to believe."

"The chief will fax you her statement as soon as she signs it. I'm bringing back mud samples from the wheel wells of the car—"

"Mud samples?"

"You may have noticed the gas company has been replacing their line on the street and hasn't repaved yet. We had a spring shower that evening. If the car was there, it could have picked up a little mud crossing the fill. Have Salter pick up some dirt for comparison."

"Great. Now I have two suspects. That guy Reynolds? I couldn't place him because I'd seen him only in passing. Davis did. Five years ago, he'd interviewed him in a case he was working—woman strangled under similar circumstances. No apparent motive, no witnesses, no physical evidence. The case is still open. Davis remembered him because he got the impression the guy was cop-shy, like he had something to hide. I get the same feeling. How far can coincidence go?"

On the interstate, she kept the needle at eighty. Can't wait to see him clapped into jail, thought Hardie.

"He'll be arrested, of course," she said.

"At this moment, all the police are sure of is that he drove a borrowed car four hundred miles."

"He told that—girl—where he was going."

"He can claim he changed his mind. The prosecution has to prove he didn't. That's where the mud samples come in. You keep putting the pieces together until the final one completes the picture. It takes time. And patience. Twelve jurors have to be convinced beyond a reasonable doubt."

"*I'm* convinced."

"I'm not saying you're wrong, but as far as the law is concerned, your opinion doesn't count. Before you go, who else had a key to the house and the code for the security system?"

"So far as I know, only I did."

They made the trip in two and a half hours.

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She sat clutching the wheel and staring down the street. Hardie glanced at her. "Get some rest. I'll be in touch sometime tomorrow."

After breakfast he walked down to the Snow house. The curbside trees and those on the lawns were well leafed now, making the street very dark at night. No problem for someone to move around without being noticed, since the cool spring nights still kept everyone indoors.

He turned into the driveway. The Reynoldses were in the forefront of the neighborhood green-thumb brigade, while the Snows only puttered, relying on a weekly gardening service. The difference was apparent. A brilliant palette of spring color dominated the Reynoldses' side.

Which neither supported nor weakened Jake's suspicions. The fragility and loveliness of the blossoms a gardener labored to produce was no indication of personality.

The Porsche was parked on the apron before the garage but Snow wasn't home. In view of the shattered alibi, Jake had rousted him out of bed early for questioning. An old technique. Very upsetting start to anyone's day. Might make a man say something he'd regret.

Hardie knelt and examined the patio doors. Forced, as Jake had said, a narrow tool inserted in the seam to spring the lock. Many older models of sliding glass doors were as inviting as an open window. Anyone with sense added supplemental locks. The Snows hadn't, evidently feeling secure with the protection system.

He donned his reading glasses for a closer look.

"Forensic doesn't have the slightest damned idea of what the tool could be," Jake had said. "They've never seen marks like that before."

The shallow dent in the outer aluminum frame was about three-quarters of an inch wide, preceded by two scratches an inch apart on the inner one.

"What do you want?" Both the harsh voice and pose were belligerent.

No, Reynolds didn't like cops. He was poised at the edge of the driveway as if ready to defend his property and the blond Amazon three paces behind him. Arms folded, she regarded Hardie impassively.

Hardie rose. "Once a detective, always a detective."

"You're *retired*." Reynolds sounded as though he were accusing him of cheating at a game.

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The thought amused Hardie. "Retired people do strange things."

Home again, he called Jake.

"The D.A. wouldn't hold Snow," said Jake. "The lab says the car was there, but Snow swears he never left it and we can't prove he did. He says he played private eye. If he could get the goods on her, he could blackmail the senator into a bigger settlement to avoid a scandal. I can see why Amanda hates his guts. The guy is toxic waste in a thousand-dollar suit. You need a mask and protective clothing when you dig below the surface. He says he parked down the street and watched the house from shortly before twelve until three. Saw no one, so he figured the guy either left before he got there or was still inside."

"He didn't go in to find out?"

"He said there would have been no point. He'd forgotten his camera and it would've been his word against hers. I asked why he hadn't hired a P.I. to do it for him. Said he wanted the personal satisfaction. He also gave us a service station where he tanked up. So little traffic at that time of night, the attendant remembered him. The times tie in with the girl's statement. He left before nine and got back to the motel shortly after six. I tell you, Hardie, the story is so stupid, the guy just might be telling the truth. If he killed her about twelve, would it have taken him two hours to screw up the doors to make it look like a break-in? Another point. Just to add more confusion, he could've said he saw a man leave, but he didn't."

"Does Amanda know he's loose?"

"She took it very calmly. Even thanked the D.A. for explaining it wasn't over yet, that all we needed was more evidence. Incidentally, Snow says he'd borrowed the car before. His girlfriend confirms that."

"Did the autopsy show anyone had been in bed with Mrs. Snow?"

"No. And forensic didn't find a damned thing to indicate someone else had been in the house. I'm going to concentrate on Reynolds. Snow said that while his wife and Mrs. Reynolds were friends, she didn't care much for *him*. Seemed to amuse him that Reynolds had designs on his wife. He could be throwing this up as a smokescreen, but hey, no one could have seen Reynolds in the rear of the houses and his alibi isn't that strong. He and his wife had a drink with Mrs. Snow about ten-thirty in their house, the two women setting up the shopping for the next day. After she went home, they watched the late news and Leno before going to bed. Now if the wife dozed off—"

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"He'd have to make sure she wouldn't wake up while he was gone."

"Maybe she did and is keeping her mouth shut. Maybe he doctored her drink—"

Not likely. In Meg's opinion, the blond Amazon ran *that* household.

"You're really reaching. Chrissy Snow might tolerate Reynolds lurking among the azaleas with lust in his heart. A beautiful woman puts up with that all her life. But in her bedroom? Screams and more signs of a struggle than you say you found. She was taken by surprise. To do that, he'd have to get in without setting off the alarm. Let me explain something about security systems, Jake. Activating one when you go to bed is as automatic as turning off the lights and TV, so I can't believe she didn't set hers."

"She could've lied about how she felt about him, you know. He could have had a standing invitation, and she left the alarm off and the door unlocked. Something goes wrong, he kills her and jimmies the doors to cover himself. All I need is one little break, enough to justify a search warrant for his house to look for some sort of tool that could be used on the doors. Wish me luck."

Kapot! . . . Kapot! . . . Kapot!

No mistaking the sound of gunshots in a quiet residential neighborhood.

He was through the door before the echoes died.

When he reached her, a rigid Amanda was looking down at the body sprawled on the sidewalk. He needn't have hurried. Snow was dead and it wasn't likely she'd shoot anyone else.

She didn't even look at him when he took the automatic from her.

"To hell with time and patience," she said woodenly.

He dug savagely at the weeds sprouting in the flower bed. Nothing worse than thinking you were helping someone, only to find you'd done more harm than good. That trip to Bedford—that blown alibi had been all her fury needed. She couldn't accept it as just a step. Sure, she'd have learned Snow no longer had an alibi if he hadn't taken her along, but the emotional impact of actually hearing the girl—you could sense Snow smirking in the background as she parroted what he'd told her to say. Snow was a human weed but you couldn't eliminate him, at least not until you were absolutely certain. . . .

He rocked back on his heels.

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From the round wood handle to the tip, the tool in his hand was perhaps fourteen inches long, the dog-legged, square steel shaft flattening and widening into a notched blade and two sharp points about an inch apart. He was sure it had other names, but he called it a dandelion digger. Designed to be thrust into the ground at an angle to sever stalks well below the surface.

He carried it down to the Snow house and compared the tip to the marks on the doors. Obvious match. Not the most effective tool for breaking into a house, but it had worked. He had the piece he'd told Amanda would pull it all together.

Literally and figuratively, weeding was beneath the Snows. On the other hand, one or the other of the Reynoldses carried out a perpetual weed vendetta with a tool like this. And since the four had been friends, somewhere along the line the opportunity could have come to duplicate that Snow house key. Also at one time or another, that code could have been mentioned casually. If you can't trust your neighbor . . .

Jake had been reaching, but not far enough. Now he had something to work with besides speculation—enough, at least, for his search warrant.

Which left Amanda—where?

Given the vagaries of the justice system, no one could predict what would happen to her. She'd have money, influence, the best legal minds on her side. They'd put Snow on trial along with her and make sure mothers were on the jury, if it went that far.

But if she'd killed the wrong man, what the law did wouldn't matter.

He'd seen enough of her to know she could be arrogant, haughty, and snobbish, but lacing her together was a pride that would never let her shrug off a fatal mistake. She'd shatter like a pane of glass.

If he went to Jake, he'd be responsible—but if he didn't, then Reynolds . . .

"Arrrgh!" In his backyard, he threw the tool as hard as he could. Tumbling end over end, it buried itself deep in the trunk of a dogwood.

He emerged from the courthouse to face a brisk fall wind.

The trial had been short and fast—a disappointment to the media horde and the writer who'd been hoping for the meat of a novel, but not to the Mothers for Amanda, who had been flooding the talk shows with calls.

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The defense attorney used a parade of witnesses who had known Snow to destroy what little character he had. Only Mrs. Reynolds had been missing.

Over shouted objections and a thunderous gavel—after all, Amanda was on trial for killing Snow, not Snow for killing his wife—he'd managed to bring out that Jake had found the tool in Snow's garage, the steel tip carrying traces of aluminum from the door. And Reynolds had admitted it was his but swore that Snow had borrowed it, a practice not uncommon among neighbors.

The jury probably wondered why Amanda had waited two days.

Hardie descended the steps slowly. Mind wrapped up in good deeds gone astray and the dilemma of how to save the lifeboat without drowning everyone aboard, it had taken a few weeks before his thinking cleared. He'd asked himself if Reynolds, after planning for months to invade the bedroom of his young and beautiful fixation, would simply kill her after succeeding.

Not if thirty-five years of handling an unlimited variety of twisted mentalities, frustrated fantasies, and menopausal manias meant anything.

He'd strolled down to Reynolds's house and in a casual husband-to-husband private conversation, told him that he could sympathize with his using that tool on the patio doors in the morning to protect his wife after he realized she'd killed Chrissy Snow in a jealous rage. As she'd killed once before.

Dozed off, had he? Perhaps she'd slipped a little something in his drink. No matter.

A great deal of unpleasantness could be avoided if he placed her under psychiatric care—which is where she'd end up after a trial, anyway—planted the tool, and lied on the stand so that everyone would think Snow was guilty. It wouldn't be true, of course, but who cared about a man classified as toxic waste?

Reynolds hadn't been too impressed by his concern, murmuring that he had no idea what Hardie was talking about and furthermore, a spouse couldn't testify against a spouse.

Hardie patted him on the shoulder sympathetically. True, but spousal testimony wouldn't enter into it. A woman entering another's bedroom and strangling her was so rare in the annals of crime that the police would never consider his wife as a suspect at all. They would say that tool pointed to him—the lustful next-door neighbor. For which there was so much precedent that every man on the jury, all of whom had probably lusted after an attractive

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neighbor themselves at one time or another, would consider him guilty before the opening gavel. Of course, he could look forward to weekly visits from Mrs. Reynolds, living quietly and celibately while surrounded by the family assets, as supportive and caring a wife as he'd been a husband.

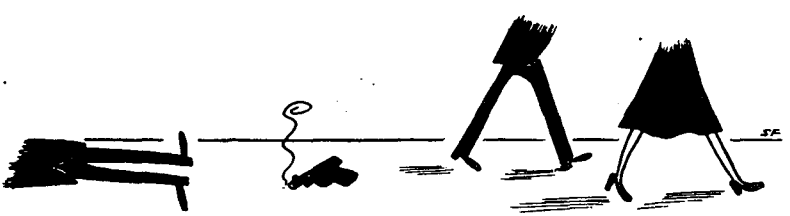
Reynolds had given an inspired performance.

Since only the two of them knew, what he'd done would remain a dangerous secret. And not because of the illegalities.

He'd wisely never told Meg about his involvement in the case. One look at Amanda, and any talk of compassion and the obligations of a father figure—well, a longtime wife noted for her artistic sensitivity could spot lust from a hundred yards away while blindfolded.

She was also noted for her artistic temperament.

Clivedon Terrace would have had another murder.



DETECTIVERSE

PROMOTION NOTION

by DIXIE J. WHITTED

A consulting detective named Keate
Didn't earn enough money to eat;
    Now he's rolling in dough,
    For a few weeks ago
He wrote, "MEN" on the door of his suite.

© 1993 by Dixie J. Whitted.

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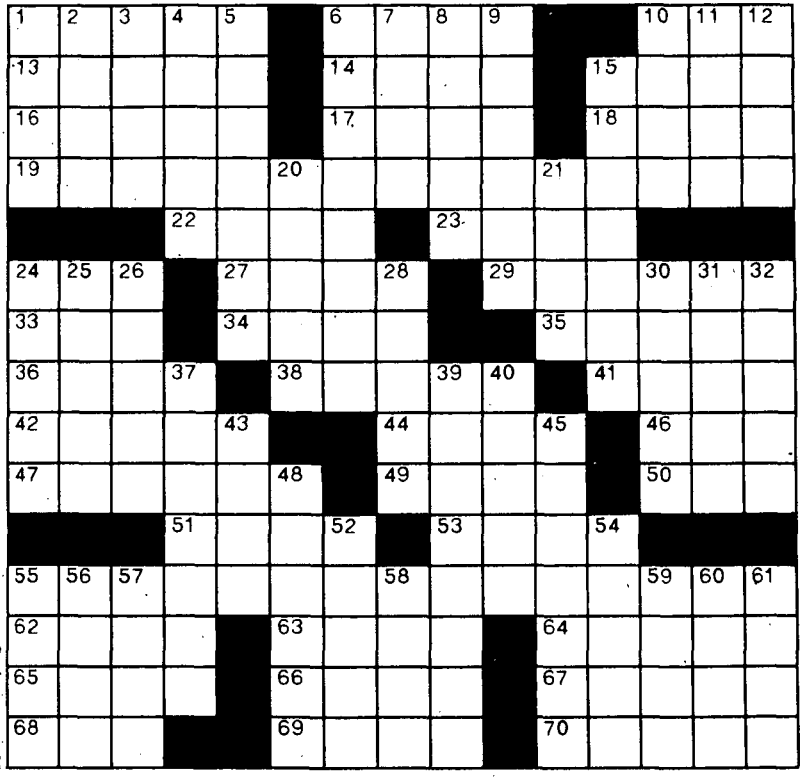
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

by Leigh Woznick



Solution on page 96

TITLE WAVES

ACROSS

1 More adorable
6 Nick & Nora's pampered pooch
10 17th letter of Greek alphabet
13 Swiftly
14 Act the lecher
15 Evening in Evian
16 Before Sam or a gun
17 Baseball's catcher Tony
18 Recess
19 Gimmick for Grimes
22 Cinders girl
23 "The End of the ——" (Grimes)

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24 Title character who does everything (Braun)
27 Projection
29 Shades of Travis McGee (MacDonald)
33 Hockey great
34 Witnessed
35 Himalayan kingdom
36 Direct
38 Simmers
41 Gravitational pull
42 Channel
44 Encounter
46 Indicate assent
47 From Mason's files (Gardner)
49 Tibetan snowman
50 Printers' measures
51 Senior dance
53 18th century German philosopher
55 Sanders' immoral motives
62 Recent (comb. form)
63 Mother of Titans
64 Prohibition
65 Garage sale sign
66 Whirlpool
67 Dialect or expression
68 The stronger sex?
69 Dregs
70 Intermediate

DOWN

1 Inspect, as a thief
2 Atop
3 Coarse seaweed
4 Lycee's prerequisite
5 Seconds
6 Acronym for Sue Grafton, after Lawrence Treat
7 Ooze
8 An even score
9 Semitic language
10 Locked murder scene
11 Apiary
12 Mineral deposits
15 Orczy's pimpernel
20 Blackthorns
21 Gas lamp
24 Infant malady
25 Scene
26 Volcanic rock
28 Bagley's thriller in Scotland (with *The)*
30 Express oneself
31 Heavy gas
32 Toboggans
37 Extends
39 Rabbi's schedule (Kemelman)
40 Like a bristle
43 Rent
45 Dickens tot
48 Buxom (Scot.)
52 British economist
54 Hebrew letter (var.)
55 Con game
56 Alleviate
57 Style
58 Capitol Hill assistant
59 Wading bird
60 Midday
61 "—— Like You" (Dahl)

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O'Neil De Noux is a former homicide detective who currently makes his living as an editor and author of crime fiction. In addition to his novels for Zebra books (the most recent of which is Crescent City Kills*), Mr. De Noux's publications include short stories for* Nova *and* New Mystery Magazine. *He joins us here with a story that, like all his work, is notable for its realistic depiction of police procedure and its evocative setting. . . .*

WHY

by O'NEIL DE NOUX

She stood on the flat cement roof, her right hand on the concrete railing, her left hand on her hip. A light wind blew through her long blond hair. She was a thin girl, a little on the short side. Wearing sunglasses, and a white T-shirt over her new white bikini. She also wore silver high heels and a thin gold ankle chain.

She looked out at the rooftops of a sweltering New Orleans on this last afternoon of her life.

"What a waste," someone said as LaStanza and his new partner pushed their way through the circle of policemen standing around the body. LaStanza was steaming already, from the heat, from the damn hundred percent humidity, from the sight of a group of pain-in-the-butt patrolmen who had nothing better to do than crowd around a body.

"All right," LaStanza said when he made it through, "who was first?" That was the only cop he needed, the responding officer, the first one on the scene.

A thin patrolman with curly black hair raised his hand and said, "Um, I'm the reporting officer. Boyer. Unit six-oh-two. I, uh . . ."

"Give it to her," LaStanza said, pointing back over his shoulder to his partner. He looked around at the other patrolmen, looked each of them in the eye, until each began to back away.

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LaStanza watched his new partner without being obvious. Detective Jodie Kintyre, in the middle of her first day in Homicide, looked flustered. Juggling her purse and notepad, she shoved her purse strap over her left shoulder, twisted the top off her gold Cross pen, and took hurried notes from an eager Patrolman Boyer.

"Slow down," LaStanza said. "We don't take shorthand."

"Sorry," Boyer apologized.

Jodie eased closer to LaStanza as Boyer continued to explain what he encountered when he arrived on the scene. Jodie, who stood a couple of inches taller than LaStanza in her high heels, was nearly as tall as Boyer. Her fair skin was flushed in the afternoon heat. Her blond hair, cut in a prim pageboy, looked mussed and damp in the humid air. She had wide catlike eyes that were narrowed even more than normal under the blistering Louisiana sun. Her starched tan suit looked rumpled as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, writing down everything Boyer told her.

LaStanza turned to the body. This one was young, looked to be about twenty or twenty-two, a couple of years younger than his nervous partner. Even dead, her well-proportioned body was sleek, her skin creamy looking. She looked like a movie-star blonde or maybe even a model. That good. Even her feet were perfectly formed. There wasn't a mark on her, at least not along the parts showing. Underneath there would be abrasions.

Only the condition of her neck revealed she was dead. It was contorted at a sharp, ninety-degree angle. He'd seen bodies in worse shape and even a few in as good a shape as this. Her left eye was half open. It was blue, light blue. Her hair was tossed around her head and neck. It was so fine, it moved in the light breeze that filtered between the dilapidated buildings lining Tchoupitoulas Street.

LaStanza ran his hand over his moustache in two downward strokes. He let out a long sigh. He'd seen too many like this. At thirty-three, after three long years in Homicide, LaStanza was an old-timer. A streak of silver had crept into his straight dark-brown hair, along his temples. That very morning he'd found a white hair in his moustache.

"Makes you wonder why, doesn't it?" Jodie asked from behind LaStanza.

LaStanza was getting a heat headache.

"In a bathing suit, to boot," Jodie added.

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LaStanza bent down on his haunches and pointed to the dead girl's hands. "See," he said as Jodie leaned forward. "No marks. She didn't try to grab anything on the way down."

"Yeah?" Jodie said in a fading voice.

"Yeah," LaStanza said as he looked up, shading his eyes from the sun. He studied the four-story building next to the body. It was a brick tenement, a worn-down, decrepit, eyesore of a building in a worn-down, decrepit part of town. A breath of superheated air stuck in LaStanza's throat like dust. It tasted of garbage.

"She's a good twenty feet from the building," he said. "Does that tell you anything?"

"No," Jodie answered quietly, as if she'd be embarrassed if anyone else heard.

"If someone falls or is thrown," LaStanza explained as he stood up, "they grab for anything on the way down. And they usually fall a couple of feet from the building. This girl was a jumper. She made sure nothing was going to stop her until she hit."

"Oh." Jodie's voice was barely audible.

He noticed she was taking continuous notes now. Good. At least she was thorough.

"You want me to canvass?" Jodie asked, looking over at him with those hazel cat eyes of hers.

LaStanza looked across Tchoupitoulas. There were two abandoned buildings there. One was half burned and the other looked as if it was about to collapse. Two large black birds flew out of the roof of the burned one. They flapped furiously, but seemed to have trouble rising in the thick, hot air. LaStanza sympathized with them.

"She left her sunglasses on the roof," Jodie said.

He looked back at her. He could see small perspiration droplets along her forehead, next to her bangs.

"Boyer told me," she said.

Obviously.

LaStanza turned and nodded toward a small group of civilians gathered on the front stoop of the old brick building next to the body. They looked like teenagers, some maybe preteen.

"Boyer says they don't know who she is," Jodie said.

LaStanza shrugged.

"Go up to the roof and look around," he told Jodie. "See if there was any evidence of a struggle." As she started away, LaStanza added, "Take Boyer with you."

"Okay."

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"And look for a note."

"Good idea."

LaStanza yanked off his light gray sport coat. He walked over to their unmarked LTD and hung the coat on the wood hanger in the backseat.

A fat patrolman with a red whiskey-nose stepped up and removed his hat.

"Why do you suppose a good looker like that would jump?"

Without answering, LaStanza pointed to the group of civilians on the stoop. "Think you can keep them around for a minute?"

"Sure. Why not?" the fat cop said, wiping his brow.

LaStanza waited by the LTD for the crime lab technician to arrive. He watched the crowd. His gaze roamed over a mixed bag of faces, mostly black. A few Hispanics and whites scattered in between. He counted thirteen. He thought they were all boys, until he noticed two hard-looking white girls at the rear of the group, girls with stringy black hair. They looked to be all of fifteen or sixteen.

The crime lab technician's name was Evans. He was even shorter than LaStanza, and bald-headed. With only a slight nod, Evans went right to work, taking pictures. LaStanza watched the teens as they watched the technician, all except one. A black kid in a red T-shirt who was sitting near the top of the stoop was looking straight ahead with glassy eyes. He looked younger than most of them, closer to twelve or thirteen. His face was ashen.

LaStanza checked his watch and made a few notes on his notepad.

Evans began taking measurements next, measuring the distance from the girl's left foot to the building, then to the nearby fire hydrant and to the curb. Triangulated measurements from each foot and each hand.

"What do you think she was doing here?" a redheaded patrolman asked LaStanza.

LaStanza tried ignoring him.

"Drugs?"

The goofball was bound to ask a million questions.

"Probably over a boyfriend," Boyer said as he arrived.

"Maybe she was washing windows." The redhead was trying to sound clever. It wasn't working.

Boyer came right back with, "Why the hell would a looker like that jump?"

Jodie moved up next to LaStanza. The sides of her face were plastered with sweat.

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"She wasn't shoved," Jodie said. "No evidence of a struggle."

"Maybe she slipped." It was the redhead again.

The opinions had no effect on LaStanza. Those were the same things cops said at every crime scene, part sarcasm, part speculation, part sick humor. See enough of those things and don't joke about it and you'd go nuts.

But LaStanza noticed that that last remark didn't sit well with Jodie. He could see daggers in her eyes as she glared at the redheaded cop.

"What's a good looker in a bikini doing around here, anyway?" Boyer said.

"Why not?" LaStanza said. "What's wrong with this place?"

That got a hearty laugh from the patrolmen. Jodie, who turned to her partner, seemed to lighten up a bit. They were, after all, on Tchoupitoulas Street, a block and a half from the St. Thomas Housing Project, in inner-city New Orleans. They were in the Sixth Police District, better known as the Bloody Sixth. There was more violent crime in the Sixth than the rest of New Orleans combined, except maybe the Desire Housing Project. Desire was a monster all to itself.

LaStanza let out another sigh. He told Jodie, "I've seen 'em get all dolled up, put on their best outfit, and then down a bottle of sleeping pills. You know the saying, 'Live fast, die young, and leave a beautiful body.' "

Evans was finishing up, so LaStanza told him, "We got some evidence on the roof."

The technician nodded, picked up his camera case, and headed up the front stoop. The crowd parted for him. LaStanza sent Jodie with him.

Stepping back over to the body, LaStanza leaned over. He gave the dead woman another long look. There was a thin, pink streak running from her mouth. At first he thought it was her crimson lipstick, but then he realized it was blood. He reached over and touched her arm. She was cool, but not cold. As the tip of his left hand brushed her forearm they connected momentarily. No matter who she had been in life, she was his responsibility now. He was the case officer, in charge of the last act of her life. He would pen her epitaph on a New Orleans Police offense-against-persons form. His report would include the death certificate from the coroner's office, as well as the autopsy report. When he put "The End" at the conclusion of his narrative, it would be done. She would be gone. So he touched her, briefly.

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Then he rose and motioned for the coroner's men, who had arrived a minute or two earlier and were standing outside their van like buzzards waiting for a signal. They came quickly, impatiently, with their black body bag. They rolled the girl over before lifting her tiny body and placing it in the plastic bag. A quick zip and she was sealed up and carted away to the meat wagon.

LaStanza examined the spot. He could feel the sun on his neck now, like a heat lamp at close range. Sweat worked its way down his back. He was still looking at the small splotches of blood where her body had come in contact with the hot cement when he heard Jodie approach.

"What are you looking for?" she asked.

"Nothing really. Just making sure a knife didn't fall out."

"Oh. Do I need the name of the doctor who pronounced her dead for my report?"

"What doctor? You ever see a doctor show up at a death when you were in patrol? Just put the time that the coroner's men took her."

Jodie wrote furiously, explaining, "The whole building's locked up except for the stairwell and the roof." LaStanza noticed a brown paper bag dangling in her left hand.

"Sunglasses," Jodie said, handing the bag to the crime lab technician. "She left them on the railing. She also left a T-shirt and a pair of silver high heels."

LaStanza saw the technician was also carrying paper bags.

"The shirt and shoes?" he asked.

Evans nodded and headed back to his crime lab van with the bags. The patrolmen were leaving now. LaStanza stepped back to the LTD with Jodie and waited. After a minute she asked, "Are we waiting for anything in particular? I already canvassed. I talked to them." She pointed to the group on the front stoop. "Nobody saw anything."

"In the morning," LaStanza said, "make sure we get the gold chain at the autopsy."

"What chain?"

LaStanza looked at his partner and shook his head. "The one on her ankle."

"Oh."

"The little things," he said. "Look for the little things."

"I know," Jodie said apologetically.

LaStanza crossed his arms and leaned back against the car and waited. Jodie seemed edgy. It was time for another lesson.

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"Take a look at the crowd," LaStanza said. Then he added, "Not too obviously."

Jodie peeked at the group at the front of the building.

"Check out the kid in the red T-shirt," LaStanza said in a low voice.

He could see Jodie nod slightly. She was trying to be cool, looking away. But she was too impatient to stand still. She began to fidget. LaStanza waited.

After another few minutes, Jodie finally said, "I can't help wondering why a girl like that would do it."

"Yeah."

"I mean, I know all that stuff we learned in the academy, about suicide and temporary states of depression, but this girl was . . . awfully pretty."

LaStanza looked at his partner and narrowed his eyes.

"I know," Jodie said, "even pretty girls get sad. I ought to know." She caught herself and blushed.

LaStanza had to smile.

"I'd just like to know why," Jodie added a little more forcefully.

"In Homicide," LaStanza said, "why isn't one-tenth as important as who, what, when, where, and especially how."

After some of the teens moved away, LaStanza leaned toward his partner and said, "Go occupy the rest of them. Talk to 'em while I talk to the kid."

"Okay," Jodie said as she moved away. Her blush was gone but he could barely tell, her face was so flushed. Jodie stepped over to where an Hispanic boy and a black boy were now standing with the two girls with the stringy black hair. Jodie seemed to get the boys' attention quickly. Probably the blond hair.

LaStanza eased over to the stoop and sat on the step below the kid in the red T-shirt. Reaching into his coat pocket, he pulled out a pack of chewing gum, opened it, and reached a stick out to the boy.

The boy, who blinked his huge eyes twice, looked at the stick of gum and shook his head. His eyes were such a dark brown they were almost black.

"Go on, take it," LaStanza said.

The boy shook his head again and looked away.

LaStanza unwrapped the stick of gum, put it in his mouth, and began to chew. He waited a few seconds before asking his first question.

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"You live around here?"

"Yessir," the kid answered in a low voice.

"My name's LaStanza. What's your name?"

"Willie." The kid cleared his throat and said, "Willie Harvey. I stays around the corner on Religious Street."

Right in the St. Thomas Housing Project.

"How old are you?" LaStanza asked.

"Twelve."

LaStanza turned slowly and looked into Willie's eyes and the boy blinked and looked away quickly, but not quickly enough to hide the recognition that passed between them. It was an instantaneous thing, and they both knew it. Suddenly the ashen face seemed nervous.

LaStanza let it sink in a moment before saying, "You saw it, didn't you?"

Willie's voice was so low it was barely audible. "Yessir."

LaStanza looked up in time to notice just how good a job Jodie was doing. She had both boys grinning at her and both girls yakking simultaneously. They all seemed to be having a good time.

LaStanza got up and tapped Willie on the knee as he climbed the stoop. "Come on, Willie," he said as he passed. The boy rose, his head bent down, and followed LaStanza into the building.

The building was insufferably hot. It smelled of urine and stale cigarette smoke. The stairs were in decent enough shape but the railing along the second floor was loose and there was enough graffiti on the walls to paint the outside of the entire building. LaStanza led the way. He didn't look back at Willie. He could hear the boy following.

They went up all four flights. The door to the roof was missing. LaStanza stepped out and had to shield his eyes again from the sun. He moved to the spot and looked around. It was a little breezier up there.

"Where was she, exactly?"

Willie pointed to the concrete railing. Then he pointed to a large air-conditioning unit and said, "I was up here, just lookin' around, and she come up. So I watched her. From behind that."

"She was alone?"

"Yessir." Willie wouldn't look at him. He looked everywhere but at LaStanza's eyes.

"Did she see you?"

"No. I hid."

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Willie began to fidget as he stood awkwardly next to LaStanza. He looked around the roof and back to the spot before continuing. "She come stand here and look around and then she put her glasses on the railing and pulls off her shirt and kicks off her shoes and clams up on the railing. Then she stood up."

Willie paused before adding, "She just stood there. She reach around and pull at the bottom of her bikini. Then I hear her suck in a deep breath. She bend her knees and jump."

LaStanza was watching the spot now and envisioned the girl, standing up on the rail, reaching around to pull on the bottom of the bikini before . . .

"Man," Willie said, "she dove off the building like those Olympics."

LaStanza moved over to the edge, gave a quick look around. Jodie was still at it. LaStanza turned and started back across the roof. Willie was staring at his feet as LaStanza passed.

"Come on," he told the kid.

"I wonder why she did it," Willie said.

LaStanza stopped and shrugged.

"We don't know why," he said. "Probably never know why."

The sun was baking the top of LaStanza's head. He ran his hand through his hair and shook it.

"I mean, she wasn't ugly or fat or nothin'."

"Come on, Willie," LaStanza said before stepping into the oven-like building to get away from the sun. Starting down the stairs, he heard Willie following. On the last flight, Willie called out to him.

"Sir, I just don't understand."

LaStanza turned back and said, "Nobody understands, son. It's just something that happens."

Willie looked at him as if he were talking in a foreign language. LaStanza shrugged and continued down. Jodie was leaning against their car now with the Hispanic teen. Wearing all black, a tank top and jeans, the Hispanic's pants were so tight there was no way he could move, except in very short steps. The two made quite a sight.

LaStanza fought back a smile. He started down the stoop. He heard Willie behind him and looked back to see the boy sit on the top step. The large black-brown eyes were staring right at him.

"Thanks," LaStanza said.

Willie looked away, his lips pursed, as if he didn't want to hear it. LaStanza turned to leave, but paused a moment. He reached into his pocket for another piece of gum and offered it to the boy.

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"I don't want no gum," Willie said in a voice thick with emotion.

LaStanza put the gum away and sat down below Willie and leaned back on his elbows.

"I've handled a lot of these," he said. "People kill themselves. Nobody knows why exactly. Everybody has a different reason, I guess." He could see that Willie was listening, even though the boy looked down the street. So LaStanza continued.

"People get so depressed, get so sad, they think that killing themselves is the only way to end the pain. They go crazy for a little while."

"She didn't look crazy." Willie's voice almost broke.

"She was. She really was. I had a guy one time who jumped off the goddamn Mississippi River Bridge and lived. He told me he didn't even know why he did it, couldn't understand why, and was sorry he did. The guy's crippled now and is just happy to be alive."

Willie let out a long breath and shoved his hands into the rear pockets of his jeans. He stood up and walked around LaStanza down the steps. Stopping on the sidewalk, Willie turned his face half around to the detective and said, "I still don't get it. Man, she was pretty." He punctuated the word pretty with an angry nod.

LaStanza watched the boy move away. He closed his eyes for a minute and turned his face up to the sun to feel the heat. He heard Jodie approaching long before she said, "Did you find out why she jumped?"

LaStanza let out a long sigh.

"I mean, did the kid know anything?"

Jesus, LaStanza thought, is she serious?

"Okay," she said, "I was just asking."

LaStanza's voice was low and purposeful as he said, "We don't have to know why. We just have to know what happened and how it happened. We don't even have to know who she is. It'd be nice if we did."

"Oh."

Jodie shuffled her feet before she said, "I know I have a lot to learn. Especially about not getting all the answers, huh?"

LaStanza closed his eyes once again and faced the sun. He wanted to feel the searing heat on his face. He heard Jodie sit next to him. He felt himself drifting on a wave of superhot air. A snapshot vision of the girl came into his mind. She was standing on the roof, her right hand on the concrete railing, her left hand on her hip. The wind blew through her long blond hair. She looked out at the dirty

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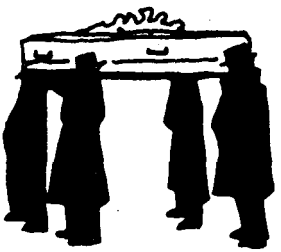
city. LaStanza was behind her as she placed her sunglasses on the railing, as she pulled off her T-shirt, kicked off her high heels, and climbed up on the railing. He watched her jump.

His eyes snapped open. He knew he still had a lot to learn. He knew that if he could talk to her, even he would be tempted to ask her why. He also knew she would look at him as if he were speaking a foreign language..



SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

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a *NEW* short story by

IAN RANKIN

Ian Rankin has been employed variously as a teacher, taxman, swineherd, and jazz reviewer, but now writes full time, and divides his time between Scotland, England, and rural France. Stories such as the following, featuring Inspector John Rebus, though set in Edinburgh, are written from France, since Mr. Rankin finds that, "the further I get from Edinburgh, the better I seem able to think about it . . ."

CONCRETE EVIDENCE

by IAN RANKIN

"It's amazing what you find in these old buildings," said the contractor, a middle-aged man in safety helmet and overalls. Beneath the overalls lurked a shirt and tie, the marks of his station. He was the chief, the gaffer. Nothing surprised him anymore, not even unearthing a skeleton.

"Do you know," he went on, "in my time, I've found everything from ancient coins to a pocket watch. How old do you reckon he is then?"

"We're not even sure it *is* a he, not yet. Give us a chance, Mr. Beesford."

"Well, when can we start work again?"

"Later on today."

"Must be gey old though, eh?"

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, it's got no clothes on, has it? They've perished. Takes time for that to happen, plenty of time. . . ."

Rebus had to concede, the man had a point. Yet the concrete floor beneath which the bones had been found . . . *it* didn't look so old, did

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it? Rebus cast an eye over the cellar again. It was situated a storey or so beneath road-level, in the basement of an old building off the Cowgate. Rebus was often in the Cowgate; the mortuary was just up the road. He knew that the older buildings here were a veritable warren; long narrow tunnels ran here, there, and, it seemed, everywhere, semicylindrical in shape and just about high enough to stand up in. This present building was being given the full works—gutted, new drainage system, rewiring. They were taking out the floor in the cellar to lay new drains and also because there seemed to be damp—certainly there was a fusty smell to the place—and its cause needed to be found.

They were expecting to find old drains, open drains perhaps. Maybe even a trickle of a stream, something which would lead to damp. Instead, their pneumatic drills found what remained of a corpse, perhaps hundreds of years old. Except, of course, for that concrete floor. It couldn't be more than fifty or sixty years old, could it? Would clothing deteriorate to a visible nothing in so short a time? Perhaps the damp could do that. Rebus found the cellar oppressive. The smell, the shadowy lighting provided by portable lamps, the dust.

But the photographers were finished, and so was the pathologist, Dr. Curt. He didn't have too much to report at this stage, except to comment that he preferred it when skeletons were kept in cupboards, not confined to the cellar. They'd take the bones away, along with samples of the earth and rubble around the find, and they'd see what they would see.

"Archaeology's not really my line," the doctor added. "It may take me some time to bone up on it." And he smiled his usual smile.

It took several days for the telephone call to come. Rebus picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Inspector Rebus? Dr. Curt here. About our emaciated friend."

"Yes?"

"Male, five feet ten inches tall, probably been down there between thirty and thirty-five years. His left leg was broken at some time, long before he died. It healed nicely. But the little finger on his left hand had been dislocated and it did *not* heal so well. I'd say it was crooked all his adult life. Perfect for afternoon tea in Morningside."

"Yes?" Rebus knew damned well Curt was leading up to something. He knew, too, that Curt was not a man to be hurried.

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"Tests on the soil and gravel around the skeleton show traces of human tissue, but no fibres or anything that might have been clothing. No shoes, socks, underpants, nothing. Altogether, I'd say he was buried there in the altogether."

"But did he die there?"

"Can't say."

"All right, what did he die *of*?"

There was an almost palpable smile in Curt's voice. "Inspector, I thought you'd never ask. Blow to the skull, a blow of considerable force to the back of the head. Murder I'd say. Yes, definitely murder."

There were, of course, ways of tracing the dead, of coming to a near-infallible identification. But the older the crime, the less likely this outcome became. Dental records, for example. They just weren't *kept* in the fifties and sixties the way they are today. A dentist practising then would most probably be playing near-full-time golf by now. And the record of a patient who hadn't been in for his checkup since 1960? Discarded, most probably. Besides, as Dr. Curt pointed out, the man's teeth had seen little serious work, a few fillings, a single extraction.

The same went for medical records, which didn't stop Rebus from checking. A broken left leg, a dislocated left pinkie. Maybe some aged doctor would recall? But then again, maybe not. Almost certainly not. The local papers and radio were interested, which was a bonus. They were given what information the police had, but no memories seemed to be jogged as a result.

Curt had said he was no archaeologist; well, Rebus was no historian either. He knew other cases—contemporary cases—were yammering for his attention. The files stacked up on his desk were evidence enough of that. He'd give this one a few days, a few hours of his time. When the dead ends started to cluster around him, he'd drop it and head back for the here and now.

Who owned the building back in the 1950s? That was easy enough to discover: a wine importer and merchant. Pretty much a one-man operation, Hillbeith Vintners had held the premises from 1948 until 1967. And yes, there was a Mr. Hillbeith, retired from the trade and living over in Burntisland, with a house gazing out across silver sands to the grey North Sea.

He still had a cellar, and insisted that Rebus have a "wee taste" from it. Rebus got the idea that Mr. Hillbeith liked visitors—a socially acceptable excuse for a drink. He took his time in the cellar

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(there must have been over 500 bottles in there) and emerged with cobwebs hanging from his cardigan, holding a dusty bottle of something nice. This he opened and set on the mantelpiece. It would be half an hour or so yet at the very least before they could usefully have a glass.

Mr. Hillbeith was, he told Rebus, seventy-four. He'd been in the wine trade for nearly half a century and had "never regretted a day, not a day, nor even an hour." Lucky you, Rebus thought to himself.

"Do you remember having that new floor laid in the cellar, Mr. Hillbeith?"

"Oh yes. That particular cellar was going to be for best claret. It was just the right temperature, you see, and there was no vibration from passing buses and the like. But it was damp, had been ever since I'd moved in. So I got a building firm to take a look. They suggested a new floor and some other alterations. It all seemed fairly straightforward and their charges seemed reasonable, so I told them to go ahead."

"And when was this, sir?"

"Nineteen sixty. The spring of that year. There you are, I've got a great memory where business matters are concerned." His small eyes beamed at Rebus through the thick lenses of their glasses. "I can even tell you how much the work cost me . . . and it was a pretty penny at the time. All for nothing, as it turned out. The cellar was still damp, and there was always that *smell* in it, a very unwholesome smell. I couldn't take a chance with the claret, so it became the general stockroom, empty bottles and glasses, packing cases, that sort of thing."

"Do you happen to recall, Mr. Hillbeith, was the smell there *before* the new floor was put in?"

"Well, certainly there was *a* smell there before the floor was laid, but the smell afterwards was different somehow." He rose and fetched two crystal glasses from the china cabinet, inspecting them for dust. "There's a lot of nonsense talked about wine, Inspector. About decanting, the type of glasses you must use, and so on. Decanting can help, of course, but I prefer the feel of the bottle. The bottle, after all, is part of the wine, isn't it?" He handed an empty glass to Rebus. "We'll wait a few minutes yet."

Rebus swallowed drily. It had been a long drive. "Do you recall the name of the firm, sir, the one that did the work?"

Hillbeith laughed. "How could I forget? Abbot & Ford, they were called. I mean, you just don't forget a name like that, do you? Abbot

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& Ford. You see, it sounds like Abbotsford, doesn't it? A small firm they were, mind. But you may know one of them, Alexander Abbot."

"Of Abbot Building?"

"The same. He went on to make quite a name for himself, didn't he? Quite a fortune. Built up quite a company, too, but he started out small like most of us do."

"How small, would you say?"

"Oh, small, small. Just a few men." He rose and stretched an arm towards the mantelpiece. "I think this should be ready to taste, Inspector. If you'll hold out your glass—"

Hillbeith poured slowly, deliberately, checking that no lees escaped into the glass. He poured another slow, generous measure for himself. The wine was reddish-brown. "Robe and disc not too promising," he muttered to himself. He gave his glass a shake and studied it. "Legs not promising either." He sighed. "Oh dear." Finally, Hillbeith sniffed the glass anxiously, then took a swig.

"Cheers," said Rebus, indulging in a mouthful. A mouthful of vinegar. He managed to swallow, then saw Hillbeith spit back into the glass.

"Oxidisation," the old man said, sounding cruelly tricked. "It happens. I'd best check a few more bottles to assess the damage. Will you stay, Inspector?" Hillbeith sounded keen.

"Sorry, sir," said Rebus, ready with his get-out clause. "I'm still on duty."

Alexander Abbot, aged fifty-five, still saw himself as the force behind the Abbot Building Company. There might be a dozen executives working furiously beneath him, but the company had grown from *his* energy and from *his* fury. He was chairman, and a busy man, too. He made this plain to Rebus at their meeting in the executive offices of ABC. The office spoke of business confidence, but then in Rebus's experience this meant little in itself. Often, the more dire straits a company was in, the healthier it tried to look. Still, Alexander Abbot seemed happy enough with life.

"In a recession," he explained, lighting an overlong cigar, "you trim your work force pronto. You stick with regular clients, good payers, and don't take on too much work from clients you don't know. They're the ones who're likely to welch on you or go bust, leaving nothing but bills. Young businesses . . . they're always hit hardest in a recession, no backup, you see. Then, when the recession's over for another few years, you dust yourself off and go touting

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for business again, rehiring the men you laid off. That's where we've always had the edge over Jack Kirkwall."

Kirkwall Construction was ABC's main competitor in the Lowlands, when it came to medium-sized contracts. Doubtless Kirkwall was the larger company. It too was run by a "self-made" man, Jack Kirkwall. A larger-than-life figure. There was, Rebus quickly realised, little love lost between the two rivals.

The very mention of Kirkwall's name seemed to have dampened Alexander Abbot's spirits. He chewed on his cigar like it was a debtor's finger.

"You started small though, didn't you, sir?"

"Oh aye, they don't come much smaller. We were a pimple on the bum of the construction industry at one time." He gestured to the walls of his office. "Not that you'd guess it, eh?"

Rebus nodded. "You were still a small firm back in nineteen sixty, weren't you?"

"Nineteen sixty. Let's think. We were just starting out. It wasn't ABC then, of course. Let's see. I think I got a loan from my dad in nineteen fifty-seven, went into partnership with a chap called Hugh Ford, another self-employed builder. Yes, that's right. Nineteen sixty, it was Abbot & Ford. Of course it was."

"Do you happen to remember working at a wine merchant's in the Cowgate?"

"When?"

"The spring of nineteen sixty."

"A wine merchant's?" Abbot furrowed his brow. "Should be able to remember that. Long time ago, mind. A wine merchant's."

"You were laying a new floor in one of the cellars, amongst other work. Hillbeith Vintners."

"Oh aye, Hillbeith, it's coming back now. I remember him. Little funny chap with glasses. Gave us a case of wine when the job was finished. Nice of him, but the wine was a bit off as I remember."

"How many men were working on the job?"

Abbot exhaled noisily. "Now you're asking. It was over thirty years ago, Inspector."

"I appreciate that, sir. Would there be any records?"

Abbot shook his head. "There might have been up to about ten years ago, but when we moved into this place a lot of the older stuff got chucked out. I regret it now. It'd be nice to have a display of stuff from the old days, something we could set up in the reception. But no, all the Abbot & Ford stuff got dumped."

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"So you don't remember how many men were on that particular job? Is there anyone else I could talk to, someone who might—"

"We were small back then, I can tell you that. Mostly using casual labour and part-timers. A job that size, I wouldn't think we'd be using more than three or four men, if that."

"You don't recall anyone going missing? Not turning up for work, that sort of thing?"

Abbot bristled. "I'm a stickler for time-keeping, Inspector. If anyone had done a bunk, I'd remember, I'm pretty sure of that. Besides, we were careful about who we took on. No lazy buggers, nobody who'd do a runner halfway through a job."

Rebus sighed. Here was one of the dead ends. He rose to his feet. "Well, thanks anyway, Mr. Abbot. It was good of you to find time to see me." The two men shook hands, Abbot rising to his feet.

"Not at all, Inspector. Wish I could help you with your little mystery. I like a good detective story myself." They were almost at the door now.

"Oh," said Rebus, "just one last thing. Where could I find your old partner, Mr. Ford?"

Abbot's face lost its animation. His voice was suddenly that of an old man. "Hugh died, Inspector. A boating accident. He was drowned. Hell of a thing to happen. Hell of a thing."

Two dead ends.

Mr. Hillbeith's telephone call came later that day, while Rebus was ploughing through the transcript of an interview with a rapist. His head felt full of foul-smelling glue, his stomach acid with caffeine.

"Is that Inspector Rebus?"

"Yes, hello, Mr. Hillbeith. What can I do for you?" Rebus pinched the bridge of his nose and screwed shut his eyes.

"I was thinking all last night about that skeleton."

"Yes?" In between bottles of wine, Rebus didn't doubt.

"Well, I was trying to think back to when the work was being done. It might not be much, but I definitely recall that there were four people involved. Mr. Abbot and Mr. Ford worked on it pretty much full time, and there were two other men, one of them a teenager, the other in his forties. They worked on a more casual basis."

"You don't recall their names?"

"No, only that the teenager had a nickname. Everyone called him by that. I don't think I ever knew his real name."

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"Well, thanks anyway, Mr. Hillbeith. I'll get back to Mr. Abbot and see if what you've told me jogs his memory."

"Oh, you've spoken to him then?"

"This morning. No progress to report. I didn't realise Mr. Ford had died."

"Ah, well, that's the other thing."

"What is?"

"Poor Mr. Ford. Sailing accident, wasn't it?"

"That's right."

"Only I remember that too. You see, that accident happened just after they'd finished the job. They kept talking about how they were going to take a few days off and go fishing. Mr. Abbot said it would be their first holiday in years."

Rebus's eyes were open now. "How soon was this after they'd finished your floor?"

"Well, directly after, I suppose."

"Do you remember Mr. Ford?"

"Well, he was very quiet. Mr. Abbot did all the talking, really. A very quiet man. A hard worker though, I got that impression."

"Did you notice anything about his hands? A misshapen pinkie?"

"Sorry, Inspector, it *was* a long time ago."

Rebus appreciated that. "Of course it was, Mr. Hillbeith. You've been a great help. Thank you."

He put down the receiver. A long time ago, yes, but still murder, still calculated and cold-blooded murder. Well, a path had opened in front of him. Not much of a path perhaps, a bit overgrown and treacherous. Nevertheless . . . Best foot forward, John. Best foot forward.

Of course, he kept telling himself, he was still ruling possibilities out rather than ruling them in, which was why he wanted to know a little more about the boating accident. He didn't want to get the information from Alexander Abbot.

Instead, the morning after Hillbeith's phone call, Rebus went to the National Library of Scotland on George IV Bridge. The doorman let him through the turnstile and he climbed an imposing staircase to the reading room. The woman on the desk filled in a one-day reader's card for him and showed him how to use the computer. There were two banks of computers being used by people to find the books they needed. Rebus had to go into the reading room and find an empty chair, note its number, and put this on his slip when he'd

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decided which volume he required. Then he went to his chair and sat, waiting.

There were two floors to the reading room, both enveloped by shelves of reference books. The people working at the long desks downstairs seemed bleary. Just another morning's graft for them; but Rebus found it all fascinating. One person worked with a card index in front of him, to which he referred frequently. Another seemed asleep, head resting on arms. Pens scratched across countless sheets of paper. A few souls, lost for inspiration, merely chewed on their pens and stared at the others around them, as Rebus was doing.

Eventually, his volume was brought to him. It was a bound edition of the *Scotsman,* containing every issue for the months from January to June, 1960. Two thick leather buckles kept the volume closed. Rebus untied these and began to turn the pages.

He knew what he was looking for, and pretty well where to find it, but that didn't stop him browsing through football reports and front-page headlines. 1960. He'd been fifteen, preparing to leave school and go into the army. He'd been busy trying to lose his virginity and supporting Hearts. Yes, a long time ago.

The story hadn't quite made the front page. Instead, there were two paragraphs on page three.

"Drowning Off Lower Largo." The victim, Mr. Hugh Ford, was described as being twenty-six years of age (a year older than the survivor, Mr. Alex Abbot) and a resident of Duddingston, Edinburgh. The men, on a short fishing holiday, had taken a boat out early in the morning, a boat hired from a local man, Mr. John Thomson. There was a squall, and the boat capsized. Mr. Abbot, a fair swimmer, had made it back to the shore. Mr. Ford, a poor swimmer, had not. Mr. Ford was further described as a "bachelor, a quiet man, shy according to Mr. Abbot, who was still under observation at the Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy." There was a little more, but not much. Apparently, Ford's parents were dead, but he had a sister, Mrs. Isabel Hammond, somewhere out in Australia.

Why hadn't Abbot mentioned any of this? Maybe he wanted to forget. Maybe it still gave him the occasional bad dream. And of course he would have forgotten all about the Hillbeith contract precisely because this tragedy happened so soon afterwards. So soon. Just the one line of print really bothered Rebus; just that one sentence niggled.

"Mr. Ford's body has still not been recovered."

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* * *

Records might get lost in time, but not by Fife Police. They sent on what they had, much of it written in fading ink on fragile paper, some of it typed—badly. The two friends and colleagues, Abbot and Ford, had set out on Friday evening to the Fishing-Net Hotel in Largo, arriving late. As arranged, they'd set out early next morning on a boat they'd hired from a local man, John Thomson. The accident had taken place only an hour or so after setting out. The boat was recovered. It had been overturned, but of Ford there was no sign. Inquiries were made. Mr. Ford's belongings were taken back to Edinburgh by Mr. Abbot, after the latter was released from hospital, having sustained a bump to the head when the boat turned over. He was also suffering from shock and exhaustion. Mr. Ford's sister, Mrs. Isabel Hammond, was never traced.

They had investigated a little further. The business run jointly by Messrs. Abbot and Ford now became Mr. Abbot's. The case notes contained a good amount of information and suspicion—between the lines, as it were. Oh yes, they'd investigated Alexander Abbot, but there had been no evidence. They'd searched for the body, had found none. Without a body, they were left with only their suspicions and their nagging doubts.

"Yes," Rebus said quietly to himself, "but what if you were looking for the body in the wrong place?" The wrong place at the wrong time. The work on the cellar had ended on Friday afternoon, and by Saturday morning Hugh Ford had ceased to exist.

The path Rebus was on had become less overgrown, but it was still rock-strewn and dangerous, still a potential dead end.

The Fishing-Net Hotel was still in existence, though apparently much changed from its 1960 incarnation. The present owners told Rebus to arrive in time for lunch if he could and it would be on the house. Largo was north of Burntisland but on the same coastline. Alexander Selkirk, the original of Defoe's Robinson Crusoe, had a connection with the fishing village. There was a small statue of him somewhere which Rebus had been shown as a boy (but only after much hunting, he recalled). Largo was picturesque, but then so were most, if not all, of the coastal villages in Fife's "East Neuk." But it was not yet quite the height of the tourist season and the customers taking lunch at the Fishing-Net Hotel were businessmen and locals.

It was a good lunch, as picturesque as its surroundings but with a bit more flavour. And afterwards, the owner, an Englishman for

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whom life in Largo was a long-held dream come true, offered to show Rebus round, including "the very room your Mr. Ford stayed in the night before he died."

"How can you be sure?"

"I looked in the register."

Rebus managed not to look too surprised. The hotel had changed hands so often since 1960, he despaired of finding anyone who would remember the events of that weekend.

"The register?"

"Yes, we were left a lot of old stuff when we bought this place. The storerooms were chock-a-block. Old ledgers and what have you going back to the nineteen twenties and thirties. It was easy enough to find nineteen sixty."

Rebus stopped in his tracks. "Never mind showing me Mr. Ford's room, would you mind letting me see that register?"

He sat at a desk in the manager's office with the register open in front of him, while Mr. Summerson's finger stabbed the line. "There you are, Inspector, H. Ford. Signed in at eleven-fifty P.M., address given as Duddingston. Room number seven."

It wasn't so much a signature as a blurred scrawl and above it, on a separate line, was Alexander Abbot's own more flowing signature.

"Bit late to arrive, wasn't it?" commented Rebus.

"Agreed."

"I don't suppose there's anyone working here nowadays who worked in the hotel back then?"

Summerson laughed quietly. "People do retire in this country, Inspector."

"Of course, I just wondered." He remembered the newspaper story. "What about John Thomson? Does the name mean anything to you?"

"Old Jock? Jock Thomson? The fisherman?"

"Probably."

"Oh yes, he's still about. You'll almost certainly find him down by the dockside, or else in the Harbour Tavern."

"Thanks. I'd like to take this register with me if I may?"

Jock Thomson sucked on his pipe and nodded. He looked the archetype of the "old salt," from his baggy cord trousers to his chiselled face and silvery beard. The only departure from the norm was, perhaps, the Perrier water in front of him on a table in the Harbour Tavern.

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"I like the fizz," he explained after ordering it, "and besides, my doctor's told me to keep off the alcohol. Total abstinence, he said, total abstinence. Either the booze goes, Jock, or the pipe does. No contest."

And he sucked greedily on the pipe. Then complained when his drink arrived without "the wee slice of lemon." Rebus returned to the bar to fulfill his mission.

"Oh aye," said Thomson, "remember it like it was yesterday. Only there's not much to remember, is there?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Two inexperienced laddies go out in a boat. Boat tips. End of story."

"Was the weather going to be bad that morning?"

"Not particularly. But there *was* a squall blew up. Blew up and blew out in a matter of minutes. Long enough though."

"How did the two men seem?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, were they looking forward to the trip?"

"Don't know, I never saw them. The younger one, Abbot was it? He phoned to book a boat from me, said they'd be going out early, six or thereabouts. I told him he was daft, but he said there was no need for me to be on the dockside, if I'd just have the boat ready and tell him which one it was. And that's what I did. By the time I woke up that morning, he was swimming for the shore and his pal was food for the fish."

"So you never actually saw Mr. Ford?"

"No, and I only saw the lad Abbot afterwards, when the ambulance was taking him away."

It was fitting into place almost too easily now. And Rebus thought, sometimes these things are only visible with hindsight, from a space of years. "I don't suppose," he ventured, "you know anyone who worked at the hotel back then?"

"Owner's moved on," said Thomson, "who knows where to. It might be that Janice Dryman worked there then. Can't recall if she did."

"Where could I find her?"

Thomson peered at the clock behind the bar. "Hang around here ten minutes or so, you'll bump into her. She usually comes in of an afternoon. Meantime, I'll have another of these if you're buying."

Thomson pushed his empty glass over to Rebus. Rebus, most definitely, was buying.

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* * *

Miss Dryman—"never married, never really saw the point"—was in her early fifties. She worked in a gift shop in town and after her stint finished usually nipped into the Tavern for a soft drink and "a bit of gossip." Rebus asked what she would like to drink.

"Lemonade, please," she said, "with a drop of whiskey in it." And she laughed with Jock Thomson, as though this were an old and cherished joke between them. Rebus, not used to playing the part of straight man, headed yet again for the bar.

"Oh yes," she said, her lips poised above the glass. "I was working there at the time all right. Chambermaid and general dogsbody, that was me."

"You wouldn't see them arrive though?"

Miss Dryman looked as though she had some secret to impart. "*Nobody* saw them arrive, I know that for a fact. Mrs. Dennis who ran the place back then, she said she'd be buggered if she'd wait up half the night for a couple of fishermen. They knew what rooms they were in and their keys were left at reception."

"What about the front door?"

"Left unlocked, I suppose. The world was a safer place back then."

"Aye, you're right there," added Jock Thomson, sucking on his sliver of lemon.

"And Mr. Abbot and Mr. Ford knew this was the arrangement?"

"I suppose so. Otherwise it wouldn't have worked, would it?"

So Abbot knew there'd be nobody around at the hotel, not if he left it late enough before arriving.

"And what about in the morning?"

"Mrs. Dennis said they were up and out before she knew anything about it. She was annoyed because she'd already cooked the kippers for their breakfast before she realised."

So nobody saw them in the morning either. In fact . . .

"In fact," said Rebus, "nobody saw Mr. Ford at all. Nobody at the hotel, not you, Mr. Thomson, nobody." Both drinkers conceded this.

"I saw his stuff though," said Miss Dryman.

"What stuff?"

"In his room, his clothes and stuff. That morning. I didn't know anything about the accident and I went in to clean."

"The bed had been slept in?"

"Looked like it. Sheets all rumpled. And his suitcase was on the floor, only half unpacked. Not that there was much *to* unpack."

"Oh?"

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"A single change of clothes, I'd say. I remember them because they seemed mucky, you know, not fresh. Not the sort of stuff *I'd* take on holiday with me."

"What? Like he'd been working in them?"

She considered this. "Maybe."

"No point wearing clean clothes for fishing," Thomson added. But Rebus wasn't listening.

Ford's clothes, the clothes he had been working in while laying the floor. It made sense. Abbot bludgeoned him, stripped him, and covered his body in fresh cement. He'd taken the clothes away with him and put them in a case, opening it in the hotel room, ruffling the sheets. Simple, but effective. Effective these past thirty years. The motive? A falling-out perhaps, or simple greed. It was a small company, but growing, and perhaps Abbot hadn't wanted to share. Rebus placed a five-pound note on the table.

"To cover the next couple of rounds," he said, getting to his feet. "I'd better be off. Some of us are still on duty."

There were things to be done. He had to speak to his superior, Chief Inspector Lauderdale. And that was for starters. Maybe Ford's Australian sister could be traced this time round. There had to be someone out there who could acknowledge that Ford had suffered from a broken leg in youth, and that he had a crooked finger. So far, Rebus could think of only one person—Alexander Abbot. Somehow, he didn't think Abbot could be relied on to tell the truth, the whole truth.

Then there was the hotel register. The forensics lab could ply their cunning trade on it. Perhaps they'd be able to say for certain that Ford's signature was merely a bad rendition of Abbot's. But again, he needed a sample of Ford's handwriting in order to substantiate that the signature was not genuine. Who did he know who might possess such a document? Only Alexander Abbot. Or Mr. Hillbeith, but Mr. Hillbeith had not been able to help.

"No, Inspector, as I told you, it was Mr. Abbot who handled all the paperwork, all that side of things. If there is an invoice or a receipt, it will be in his hand, not Mr. Ford's. I don't recall ever seeing Mr. Ford writing anything."

No through road.

Chief Inspector Lauderdale was not wholly sympathetic. So far all Rebus had to offer were more suppositions to add to those of the Fife Police at the time. There was no proof that Alexander Abbot

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had killed his partner. No proof that the skeleton was Hugh Ford. Moreover, there wasn't even much in the way of circumstantial evidence. They could bring in Abbot for questioning, but all he had to do was plead innocence. He could afford a good lawyer; and even bad lawyers weren't stupid enough to let the police probe too deeply.

"We need proof, John," said Lauderdale, "concrete evidence. The simplest proof would be that hotel signature. If we prove it's not Ford's, then we have Abbot at that hotel, Abbot in the boat, and Abbot shouting that his friend has drowned, *all* without Ford having been there. That's what we need. The rest of it, as it stands, is rubbish. You know that."

Yes, Rebus knew. He didn't doubt that, given an hour alone with Abbot in a darkened alley, he'd have his confession. But it didn't work like that. It worked through the law. Besides, Abbot's heart might not be too healthy. BUSINESSMAN, 55, DIES UNDER QUESTIONING. No, it had to be done some other way.

The problem was, there *was* no other way. Alexander Abbot was getting away with murder. Or was he? Why did his story have to be false? Why did the body have to be Hugh Ford's? The answer was: because the whole thing seemed to fit. Only, the last piece of the jigsaw had been lost under some sofa or chair a long time ago, so long ago now that it might remain missing forever.

He didn't know why he did it. If in doubt, retrace your steps . . . something like that. Maybe he just liked the atmosphere. Whatever, Rebus found himself back in the National Library, waiting at his desk for the servitor to bring him his bound volume of old news. He mouthed the words of "Yesterday's Papers" to himself as he waited. Then, when the volume appeared, he unbuckled it with ease and pulled open the pages. He read past the April editions, read through into May and June. Football results, headlines—and what was this? A snippet of business news, barely a filler at the bottom right-hand corner of a page. About how the Kirkwall Construction Company was swallowing up a couple of smaller competitors in Fife and Midlothian.

" 'The nineteen sixties will be a decade of revolution in the building industry,' said Managing Director Mr. Jack Kirkwall, 'and Kirkwall Construction aims to meet that challenge through growth and quality. The bigger we are, the better we are. These acquisitions strengthen the company, and they're good news for the work force, too.' "

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It was the kind of sentiment which had lasted into the 1980s. Jack Kirkwall, Alexander Abbot's bitter rival. Now there was a man Rebus ought to meet. . . .

The meeting, however, had to be postponed until the following week. Kirkwall was in hospital for a minor operation.

"I'm at that age, Inspector," he told Rebus when they finally met, "when things go wrong and need treatment or replacing. Just like any bit of well-used machinery."

And he laughed, though the laughter, to Rebus's ears, had a hollow centre. Kirkwall looked older than his sixty-two years, his skin saggy, complexion wan. They were in his living room, from where, these days, he did most of his work.

"Since I turned sixty, I've only really wandered into the company headquarters for the occasional meeting. I leave the daily chores to my son, Peter. He seems to be managing." The laughter this time was self-mocking.

Rebus had suggested a further postponement of the meeting, but when Jack Kirkwall knew that the subject was to be Alexander Abbot, he was adamant that they should go ahead.

"Is he in trouble then?"

"He might be," Rebus admitted. Some of the colour seemed to reappear in Kirkwall's cheeks and he relaxed a little further into his reclining leather chair. Rebus didn't want to give Kirkwall the story. Kirkwall and Abbot were still business rivals, after all. Still, it seemed, enemies. Given the story, Kirkwall might try some underhand tactic, some rumour in the media, and if it got out that the story originally came from a police inspector, well. Hello, being sued and goodbye, pension.

No, Rebus didn't want that. Yet he did want to know whether Kirkwall knew anything, knew of any reason why Abbot might wish, might *need* to kill Ford.

"Go on, Inspector."

"It goes back quite a way, sir. Nineteen sixty, to be precise. Your firm was at that time in the process of expansion."

"Correct."

"What did you know about Abbot & Ford?"

Kirkwall brushed the palm of one hand over the knuckles of the other. "Just that they were growing, too. Of course, they were younger than us, much smaller than us. ABC still is much smaller

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than us. But they were cocky, they were winning some contracts ahead of us. I had my eye on them."

"Did you know Mr. Ford at all?"

"Oh yes. Really, he was the cleverer of the two men. I've never had much respect for Abbot. But Hugh Ford was quiet, hardworking. Abbot was the one who did the shouting and got the firm noticed."

"Did Mr. Ford have a crooked finger?"

Kirkwall seemed bemused by the question. "I've no idea," he said at last. "I never actually met the man, I merely knew *about* him. Why? Is it important?"

Rebus felt at last his meandering, narrowing path had come to the lip of the chasm. Nothing for it but to turn back.

"Well," he said, "it would have clarified something."

"You know, Inspector, my company *was* interested in taking Abbot & Ford under our wing."

"Oh?"

"But then with the accident, that tragic accident. Well, Abbot took control and he wasn't at all interested in any offer we had to make. Downright rude, in fact. Yes, I've always thought that it was such a *lucky* accident so far as Abbot was concerned."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I mean, Inspector, that Hugh Ford was on our side. He wanted to sell up. But Abbot was against it."

So Rebus had his motive. Well, what did it matter? He was still lacking that concrete evidence Lauderdale demanded.

". . . Would it show up from his handwriting?"

Rebus had missed what Kirkwall had been saying. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't catch that."

"I said, Inspector, if Hugh Ford had a crooked finger, would it show from his handwriting?"

"Handwriting?"

"Because I had his agreement to the takeover. He'd written to me personally to tell me. Had gone behind Abbot's back, I suppose. I bet Alex Abbot was mad as hell when he found out about that." Kirkwall's smile was vibrant now. "I always thought that accident was a bit too lucky where Abbot was concerned. A bit too neat. No proof though. There was never any proof."

"Do you still have the letter?"

"What?"

"The letter from Mr. Ford, do you still have it?"

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Rebus was tingling now, and Kirkwall caught his excitement. "I never throw anything away, Inspector. Oh yes, I've got it. It'll be upstairs."

"Can I see it? I mean, can I see it now?"

"If you like," Kirkwall made to stand up, but paused. "*Is* Alex Abbot in trouble, Inspector?"

"If you've still got that letter from Hugh Ford, then yes, sir, I'd say Mr. Abbot could be in very grave trouble indeed."

"Inspector, you've made an old man very happy."

It was the letter against Alex Abbot's word, of course, and he denied everything. But there was enough now for a trial. The entry in the hotel's ledger, while it was *possibly* the work of Alexander Abbot, was *certainly* not the work of the man who had written the letter to Jack Kirkwall. A search warrant gave the police the powers to look through Abbot's home and the ABC headquarters. A contract, drawn up between Abbot and Ford when the two men had gone into partnership, was discovered to be held in a solicitor's safe. The signature matched that on the letter to Jack Kirkwall. Kirkwall himself appeared in court to give evidence. He seemed to Rebus a different man altogether from the person he'd met previously: sprightly, keening, enjoying life to the full.

From the dock, Alexander Abbot looked on almost reproachfully, as if this were just one more business trick in a life full of them. Life, too, was the sentence of the judge.

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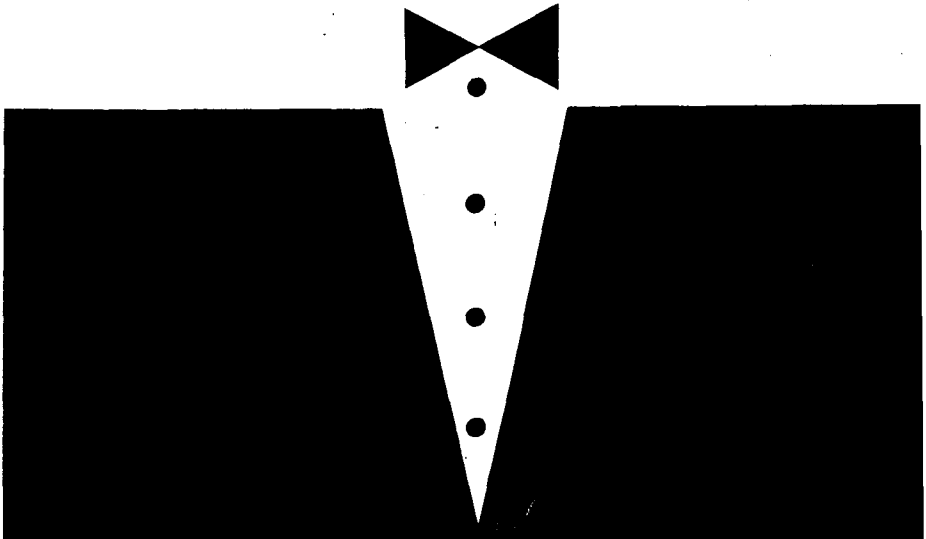

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a *NEW* short story by

LAWRENCE TREAT

You might have seen children like the boy in Lawrence Treat's story busking on street corners, frozen like statues, but have you ever imagined what they might be thinking . . . ?

TABLEAU

by LAWRENCE TREAT

He was a small, black urchin, motionless, as if carved from ebony and placed there on a flimsy crate to attract customers inside the store. Except that there was no store behind him, and he was real.

The tourists filtering along Fisherman's Wharf stopped to watch and to wonder how long he could keep his stance without moving. Some of the crowd came close and stared and waited for him to blink.

He had to move, but he never did. He had to tire and lower his outstretched arm, raise his hand, but he never did. Not until he stepped off his small platform and went into his routine. It was a mechanical kind of dance with the jerkiness of the tin woodsman or the wooden soldier. But even then, he had no expression.

Now, his second time around that day, the drama in the building across the street had played itself out and nothing had changed. Nothing. Except that it was hard for him to believe what he had just seen, and the small portion of his mind that was conscious kept telling him no, he'd made it all up. It hadn't been, hadn't happened.

He didn't dare think. If he did, if he let his thoughts loose, he'd move and ruin his act. His job was to relax, empty his mind, cut off all feelings and all awareness. He had no arms, no body. He was an object, as immobile as the brick wall behind him.

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Papa Mungo had trained him and taught him the hard way. At the beginning he'd barely been able to keep his stance for even a minute. The next minute was harder but still possible, and beyond that was torture, for when he moved, when he so much as blinked, that hard, calloused palm stung him like the slap of a plank.

"You'll learn," Papa Mungo always said. "You'll learn, or I'll scut you."

So he did what Papa Mungo told him to, because Papa Mungo had rescued him, had found him crying and wandering down a small, back alley, and Papa Mungo had stopped him.

"Little mon, what are you crying for?"

He shook his head and cried all the more.

"What you doin'?" He had no answer, he merely lowered his head and kept on crying.

"What's your name?"

"I'se Trash."

"Where you belong?"

"Nowheres."

Papa Mungo couldn't know. He'd never seen Ma get beat up, he wouldn't understand why Ma never complained. No money, no nothing. Sometimes a man came and Trash got pushed out of the room to sleep somewhere else. Sometimes Ma called him back. Sometimes not.

"Trash," Papa Mungo said. "That's one poor name. Little mon, we change it. From now on, you Cash. You get it?"

"Cash."

"I got ideas, see? You Cash. I feed you, you do like I tell you."

And thus it began.

He was made for it. All he had to do was nothing. Think nothing, hear nothing, do nothing.

He always fixed his eyes on that window across the street, and sometimes he seemed to go inside where he could see them. A man and a woman, and sometimes the woman was Ma, but the man was always different and he pulled her back to the rear of the room where they were merely silhouettes that faded away into darkness. So he waited and stood there like a statue, a small, wooden black boy, while people stared at him and said, "Is he real?"

Sometimes they tried to touch him, but they never did. An invisible force held them back, and so he stared past them and at the building across the street, and at the window with the moving figures. Papa Mungo had taught him to concentrate on one object, and

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Cash had chosen that window. It was his, and what went on inside had nothing to do with him, for his world was a world of nothingness. Nevertheless, what he saw on that particular afternoon broke through the curtain of his oblivion.

He told himself the silhouettes didn't exist, the woman wasn't Ma, she wasn't really there. Those weren't real hands grabbing at her throat. If she'd been real, she would have screamed, but she didn't. She was make-believe, and she wilted and fell out of sight, and the man disappeared and Cash did nothing.

But five minutes later, and he could guess at the time because he knew how long his routine took, five minutes later a redheaded man left the building to cross the street and lumber up to Cash. He was as broad as Cash was tall and his wrist was as thick as Cash's leg and he stopped with his face six inches away. He glared at Cash for a few seconds before he spoke, in a voice that rumbled like the traffic did when it hit those potholes.

"You keep your mouth shut or I'll kill you," the redheaded man said. And Cash didn't move and didn't blink, and the man walked off. But Cash felt a swirl of pride sweep through him, for his life had meaning. He had power over somebody else, and he exulted.

Later, when Papa Mungo came to collect the money that had been left in the hat in front of Cash, Cash dropped his arms and burst out crying. Papa Mungo picked him up and held him in his arms, tenderly and with concern.

"Little mon, what happened?"

Cash shook his head. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing."

"You tell me what," Papa Mungo said. "You tell me, for you my little mon." And Cash still said nothing.

He stayed away for two days, but he knew it would do no good.

On the third day, the battered little radio in the abandoned room that Papa Mungo called home announced that a woman had been found strangled, and the address was that of the building where Cash had seen those shapes that weren't real.

In the afternoon he went back to work and the redheaded man came. When Cash saw him, Cash said nothing, but he heard his own voice crying out, "Him! Him! He did it!"

Then the redheaded man took a swipe at Cash that knocked him down and banged his head against the pavement.

Nobody knew why the redheaded man had killed Cash, nor was anyone able to connect the redheaded man with the strangling of a woman in the house across the street; nor did they have to, for he

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was tried and convicted of the killing of a small boy who had no parents, no home, and no mourners.

Except, perhaps, a nondescript bum who went by the name of Papa Mungo.

DETECTIVERSE

NOBODY KNOWS, NATALIE

by KATHERINE H. BROOKS

Nobody clutched me as tightly as you,
nobody kept me as closely in view,
Nobody else could have managed to sell
the cloying advice that I followed so well.

Nobody knows how you guarded my wealth,
the dinners you served were designed for my health.
You watched what I did, and explained what was right,
then fixed me a Bromo to take every night.

You prodded my will when I faltered behind.
You only bought books that were good for my mind.
You urged me to exercise—made me aware
that fetching physiques are for people who care.

You kept me immaculate, shaven and clean,
and chose, on TV, what was safe to be seen,
Till the day you rejected the Dr. Ruth Show,
and nobody knows where I told you to go.

Nobody knows you're unmoving and mute,
still wearing your sneakers and exercise suit.
And covered with dust from your head to your toes.
You're up in the attic, but nobody knows.

And nobody knows that I'm glad to become
this shoddy, disgusting, impossible bum.

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Winner of the 1988 Pandora Press and Company Magazine short story competition, "The Reunion" is a first-rate tale of suspense by a Scotswoman who makes her home in a small village in Stirlingshire. Joyce Begg turned to writing after raising a family and teaching English for a brief time, and has had the pleasure of seeing her fiction published in a variety of newspapers and magazines as well as broadcast by the BBC. . . .

THE REUNION

by JOYCE BEGG

Sarah had never gone in for reunions, even one as small as this. They smacked of self-indulgence, of emotion recollected, and this time, she was sure, of morbid curiosity. She was used to that, of course. Over the last months, she had experienced a great sympathy for celebrities, whose every sneeze was the subject of public wonder and whose most intimate secrets the subject of tabloid speculation. She had become one of them, in a fashion. That was why she had been invited.

"There'll only be the five of us," Eleanor had said. "Just like the old days."

"Oh yes," she had replied, unconvinced. How could it possibly be like the old days? They hadn't seen each other for ten years. She was sure she had changed, even if the others hadn't. She had certainly been overtaken by events, large events.

"Come to my place, about seven. That'll give us a good long evening to natter."

"My place" turned out to be a renovated seventeenth-century cottage, twenty-five miles from the town, at the end of a lane in a pretty village peopled by commuters in new houses, locals whose antecedents filled the graveyard, and a colony of religious nuts who had bought over a minor stately home. As she approached the village, Sarah saw it suffused in the romance of an April dusk, an aura she instinctively distrusted even as she responded to it. The name

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of Eleanor's house completed her disillusion. "Teasel Tops." Only "Toad Hall" had a greater resonance in the minds of small children. The cottage grew from the ground, steeped in antiquity, breathing history from every stone. It deserved a better name.

The others were all there by the time Sarah arrived. Eleanor came to the door to greet her, a glitter of excitement barely concealed by the warmth of her welcome. Sarah sighed inwardly. Was it always going to be like this? Was she always going to be known as the woman who, in spite of the jury's verdict, might—just possibly—have murdered her mother?

"Sarah, you look *wonderful!*"

Sarah smiled and returned the compliment. Eleanor did look good, if a little plump. Her hair had retained its shining copper sheen, her skin its translucence. She matched her surroundings. The house was expensively and prettily furnished, and Eleanor was expensively and prettily dressed. Not only was her husband the kind of businessman who regularly shot off to foreign parts to soothe troubled contracts in exchange for large amounts of money, but Eleanor herself earned twice as much, as the creator of Mrs. Tansy of Teasel Tops, whom she would closely resemble in a few years' time. Sarah surprised herself by feeling something akin to real affection for the small, plain, clever girl who had achieved such unexpected early success.

"The others are here already. They're all dying to see you."

"Oh nonsense. I bet they're all reminiscing like mad." Sarah shrugged off her jacket and handed it to her hostess. "How are they looking?"

"Pretty good. Not as good as you, though. Honestly, Sarah, you're so *elegant.* So tall and dark and *slim,* damn you. I feel like a cottage loaf beside you."

Sarah laughed. "Nonsense," she said again.

Three heads turned towards them as Eleanor ushered her into the sitting room. The "look" was there, in all of them. Curiosity, fascination, slight unease, in varying combinations. She breathed slowly, smiled slowly. Her voice was a steady mellow contralto. "Hello, gang."

There was no doubt about it, ten years did make a difference. Although they were still in their twenties, the finest of lines were beginning to appear round the eyes.

"First things first," said Eleanor, after greetings had been exchanged, rather too fulsomely. "What's your poison, Sarah? Still on

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the illicit martini and Irn Bru, or have you graduated to something less nauseating?"

"I thought it was vodka and raspberry cordial," said Di. "I'm sure my mother thought I was a total innocent, poor woman."

"Definitely Irn Bru," said Frances. "I actually preferred it on its own, but didn't have the nerve to admit it."

Jill giggled. "Silly cow."

"Gin, please," said Sarah, and sat back in the chintz chair set aside for her. The room was furnished with exquisite taste, from the discreet antiques to the rich carpeting, each item demonstrating unusual wealth. A log fire burned in the ancient fireplace, the light glancing off polished oak and burnished silver.

There was an awkward silence in the room. One topic dominated their thoughts, and no one felt able to mention it. Sarah smiled, and then spoke. "And what have you been up to? I've heard snippets, of course, over the years, but I've been away so much."

It was one of Sarah's great regrets that she had come back from France. She had had a first-rate job in Paris for six years, before allowing herself to be driven home by an unrequited love affair and a mistaken notion of where to run to for comfort. Roots only remained roots if they were nurtured. Her parents, although glad enough to see her, had developed a perfectly good lifestyle together, one which did not include their daughter. If she had not come home, she would not have found that out. If she had not come home, the accident that killed her father and half crippled her mother would not have taken place. If she had not come home, she would not have been trapped into a second-rate job in a second-rate town, looking after the mother who had made it quite clear that of the two of them, Sarah and her father, she would much rather have lost Sarah. As a penance for surviving, she had given up her freedom, bought herself a small flat near to her mother, from where she performed her filial duties. She could not have borne to live in the same house as her mother. Things were bad enough between them even at one remove. The prosecution had made a lot of that.

"I expect you're all married with a couple of children," she said, smiling. She noticed the usual fond sort of expression which habitually overtook the features of mothers, even as they reviled their offspring. The only one on whom it didn't register was Di, who sat tight-lipped, her arms folded across a skinny rib cage under a surprisingly generous chest. "Tell me all. Eleanor, where are your children? Safely tucked in bed?"

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"Oh no." Eleanor's laugh sounded faintly metallic. "Nanny's taken them away for the weekend. She does that quite a lot, actually. I think it's the seaside this time. I hardly ever see them."

"But how can you bear it!" Frances burst in with unexpected fervour. It was too soon to be passionate, thought Sarah. Everyone was still pussyfooting around.

"Perfectly easily," said Eleanor. "I would never be able to work as well as I do with kids around the place all the time."

"But I would have thought," said Sarah in the same pleasant tones, "that children would be a huge asset to someone writing specifically for youngsters. Research sources immediately to hand, as it were."

"I don't understand," Frances persisted, "how anyone can go through all the hassle of having babies and then give them away to someone else to rear. I know I couldn't bear it."

"Careful, Fran," said Jill. "You're in danger of slipping into your Mother Earth routine."

"Oh. Am I? Sorry." Frances smiled apologetically, and Sarah realised that although she hadn't seen the others for ten years, some of them had kept up with each other. She turned to Frances.

"How many children do you have, Frances?"

"Three so far." She glowed with the kind of fulfillment that Eleanor had shown no signs of. Frances was fair- to mousey-haired, with a bland freckled face, and a permanently happy expression. It used to irritate Sarah that Frances was continually contented, had in fact to manufacture complaints to be one of an adolescent gang exchanging grievances. It was quite appealing really. She was just the same. Happy, and stuck with it.

"Fran is one of those women," said Jill, "who will whip up her sweater in a crowded restaurant, let down the flap on her maternity bra, and suckle her young."

"No I won't."

"Yes you will."

"Well. It's perfectly natural."

"Not to me, it's not," said Di, still hugging her chest in the corner.

"Do you have a family, Di?" Sarah asked.

"No."

There was a short silence.

"Neither do I," said Sarah. "Or a husband. I prefer it that way."

The silence became strained as Di reached for a pack of cigarettes, hook one out, and lit it. Eleanor rushed to find an ashtray, and Jill

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and Frances both spoke at once. Sarah looked meditatively at Di. Hadn't she heard of a romance gone wrong, a marriage on the rebound, and a subsequent divorce? There was another fragment of information on the edge of her mind, but she couldn't immediately recall it. Di was the one who had changed most. She had always been a shining blond, skinny and lively, full of an electric sort of vitality. Now she looked nervous and taut, her hair a harsh, unlikely yellow, the energy that made her lethal on the hockey field directed somehow inward.

Sarah's gaze moved along to Jill. It had always surprised her that Jill and Frances had been such friends at school, and still appeared to be on intimate terms. Perhaps it was that Frances was the only one prepared to put up with Jill's moodiness and ill nature. Sarah looked at her now. She had the same lank, dark hair, the same sallow complexion. She should. have had small close-set eyes and narrow lips, and managed to create the impression that that was exactly what her features were like, although in fact her eyes were normally spaced and her mouth wide. She had always been mean and sullen, and Sarah had the depressing feeling that nothing had changed.

"How about you, Jill? I bet you got a first and a glittering career."

"Dead brainy," Frances enthused, and Sarah cast her an amused glance. "She got a first and a Ph.D. and God knows what else, and gave it all up for the delights of domesticity. She won't tell you herself because she underrates him shockingly, but Bill is an absolute poppet and the boys are—well—they're—"

Jill laughed drily. "Even you can't think of anything good to say about them, Fran." She turned to Sarah. "They're just boys. Perfectly ordinary boys. They don't shine at anything, and show no signs of developing either brain or beauty."

"Jill! That's unfair! They're super kids!"

"They're just *there* rather too much of the time. I think Eleanor has the right idea. I wish I could afford a nanny." Jill looked around her in Eleanor's expensively appointed sitting room, as though there were a lot more things she wished she could afford. The eyes narrowed, and the lips tightened.

"Jill and Bill," said Eleanor, with the metallic tinkly laugh. "I never thought of that before."

Fran grinned. "It's a giggle, isn't it?" and the others laughed caught up in her adolescent humour.

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"I once knew a Ken and Gwen," said Di unexpectedly, and the giggling trebled. Sarah felt herself becoming infected, suddenly shedding years.

"I bet your man is Dan, Fran," she said.

The laughter was out of all proportion to the wit, and set the tone for the next hour. It carried them right through to Eleanor's elegant buffet supper, served in the wood-panelled dining room on a refectory table set with silver and crystal and the kind of lace-embroidered linen that cost several pounds per square inch and took four hours to iron. As a display of wealth one would not have called the dining room vulgar, but the quality of every item bespoke the kind of money that could be made by hitting the children's fiction market exactly right. The Teasel Tops characters, especially Mrs. Tansy, were omnipresent, in soft toys, bed linen, curtains, dress material, right down to table mats and pencil sharpeners. And all that on top of the television series. The royalties must be staggering. Even through the giggling, Sarah was aware of Eleanor's complacency and Jill's seething envy.

They sat haphazardly at the table, enjoying the perfect mushroom and prawn vol-au-vents, wafer-thin slices of ham wrapped round asparagus tips, salads full of unlikely ingredients and unexpected flavours. The quantities were delicate, the variety endless. Champagne bubbled in tall glasses, pyramids of out-of-season fruits glistened under a spun-sugar frosting.

"Makes you yearn for school dinners, doesn't it?" said Di drily.

"It's absolutely fantastic, Eleanor," said Frances. "You are clever. But then you always were."

Eleanor did not disclaim her culinary talents, although even Frances had spotted the hallmark of a professional cordon bleu caterer.

"Nonsense. I'm no smarter than the rest of you. Certainly not Jill."

Jill smiled tightly. "There's not much money to be made out of high-energy physics."

"Whether there is or not, Jill, you chose not to make it. You chose marriage and a family. And surely the compensations are overwhelming?"

Jill looked distinctly underwhelmed, and Sarah wondered just how awful her sons were.

"You seem to have managed a family *and* a career, Eleanor, and think it's just fantastic. Wonderful, really." Frances spoke through

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a mouthful of the kind of pastry that floats away of its own volition. "My kids love your books. I would tell them that I am intimately acquainted with the author except that they believe every single word on the page. They wouldn't understand what an author was. Especially Dominic. Sweet, but dim."

"I'm glad they like them," said Eleanor, unsurprised.

Frances swallowed, and sighed. "I'm not complaining, or anything, because really I'm perfectly happy and wouldn't swap John and the kids for anything, but you do seem to have everything the heart could desire, somehow."

Eleanor inclined her head graciously, and poured more wine. "I've certainly been very fortunate. Writing isn't easy, whatever people think, but yes, I have been lucky."

"Very," said Di, looking at her plate. "You got everything. Everything."

There was another awkward pause, and again Sarah tried to remember the detail about Di that had eluded her. Then she got it. Tim, Eleanor's husband. No wonder Di sounded bitter. The wonder was that she was here at all. For hadn't Eleanor stolen Di's fiancé? Yes, that was it. Why, then, was Di subjecting herself to an evening in her home? Di looked up and caught her gazing at her, and Sarah smiled awkwardly. Di's expression became speculative; changed from bitter to inquisitive. The "look" was back again, and Sarah's smile faded. In her imagination she saw, as she had seen so often, her mother's body on the bathroom floor, and the shower rail she had tried to reach to hang her clothes to air them—two skirts and a winter coat recently returned from the dry cleaners. She saw the china basin on which her mother had cracked her head when her fragile legs betrayed her and brought her crashing to the floor. She saw the winter coat, a severely tailored herringbone tweed, landing softly on top of her, smothering her in toxic fumes. Murder, said the prosecution. Accident, said Sarah. No alibi, said the prosecution. Being at home alone was certainly no alibi, but then she had had no idea she was going to need one. Murder, said the prosecution. Unprovable, said the jury. Acquitted.

Di was still watching her, and Sarah turned away.

"I wouldn't like to pay your insurance premiums," Jill was saying. "Don't you get nervous with all this stuff?" Her waving hand took in the delicate china, the ancient table, the Georgian coffeepot.

"Yes, I do a bit," Eleanor admitted. "I'm manic about locking the doors, and every window has a catch, even upstairs. But it's a small price to pay. I do love beautiful things."

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"Yes, you do, don't you?" Di smiled grimly at the photo on the sideboard. The subject was dark-haired, brown-eyed, clean-featured, with an expression of great intelligence and even humour. He was indeed a thing of beauty, and it just had to be Tim. Sarah felt an unexpected pull of sympathy for Di. He had been a glittering prize, and he had been hers.

The shocked silence went on and on. Jill's mouth turned down at the corners, half horrified, half amused. Frances's mouth dropped open, revealing a chewed strawberry. Eleanor flushed slowly from her eighteen-carat gold necklace upwards. Sarah watched her discomfiture with some interest, and then said, "Don't you have a picture of your children, Eleanor? I'd love to see them."

Eleanor shot her a look of gratitude, and leapt to her feet. "Yes, of course."

Amazingly, the evening recovered. It staggered about a bit, while everyone talked too much, especially Frances, and then Jill offered to help with the washing-up.

"Oh no. There's no need for that," said Eleanor. "I'll put away the food later, and—"

"Pop everything into the dishwasher, I expect."

Even Frances smiled at that. "Not that kind of china, kid."

"Besides," said Di, "it'll give Mrs. Mop something to do in the morning, won't it?"

Eleanor took in a deep breath. "I do need help in the mornings, Di. I work five hours before lunch."

"Of course you do. And you're absolutely right."

Eleanor led the way back to the sitting room, covering her annoyance and embarrassment by heaping more logs onto the fire. "Damn. I forgot to fill the basket. Tim left me plenty by the back door, but I forgot to bring them through."

"There's enough there," soothed Sarah. "Don't fret, Eleanor. Everything's fine."

And again Eleanor glanced gratefully in her direction.

It was interesting to track her own emotions with regard to Eleanor, to stand back and take an objective look at them. The old affection was still there, but by now, after all those years, it was compounded with other things, other experiences which had altered her own personality, not always for the better. She had become more defensive, less forgiving.

The conversation returned to its nostalgic tone, considered safest

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all round. Forgotten names were dredged from the past, forgotten conflicts, old romances. They had attended a coeducational school, so that the memories of callow youths and primitive sexual encounters were dragged into the light.

"Have you *seen* Brian Farrow? Considering his acne problem, he's turned out amazingly dishy."

"And Dave Spenser's a university lecturer. That surprised me, I must admit. I won't tell you where I thought he kept his brains."

"Hutchison Baxter's on his second wife. Did you know that, Fran? He should have stayed with you. He'd have done much better for himself."

"I'd forgotten your romance with Hutch, Fran. Was that the one you wrote the famous letter to?"

Frances's chin came up. "You mean the love letter Eleanor stole and showed to the whole sixth-form common room?" She laughed at the memory, but even after all those years and in spite of her successful marriage, the hurt was still at the back of her eyes. Sarah turned quickly to Eleanor, who had closed her eyes and screwed up her nose.

"How could you, Eleanor?" she smiled, with narrowed eyes.

"I don't know. It seemed a good idea at the time. It was just a prank."

"You could have damaged her for life," said Di, unable to keep the acid out of her voice.

"Well, I didn't," said Eleanor comfortably. "Fran is a perfect example of Fulfilled Woman. Besides, it was all a hundred years ago. Who would like another drink?"

Jill leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "I used to fancy Alan Partridge something rotten."

This was greeted by screams of hilarity, during which the Partridge was reviled as a nonstarter, mainly due to his excessively pale skin, thin chest, and the fact that his voice still hadn't made up its mind at seventeen.

"I was sorry for him!" Jill cried defensively, and then laughed against herself.

"Who did you secretly lust after, Sarah?" asked Eleanor.

Sarah stared at her. "I can't remember."

"Well, plenty of them fancied you," said Frances generously. "Old Man Martin for a start. 'That's not how to hold a pipette, Sarah. Come, let me demonstrate.' Old satyr."

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"He can't really have been old, you know," said Di. "He was probably only thirty-five."

"God. Really?"

"The one who fancied Sarah," said Jill slowly, "was Miss Pinkerton. Wasn't it, Sarah? You were her absolute favourite. I wonder how you stood it. She was all over you. I'd have *died* if she'd been as sickly to me."

Sarah's voice was deep and gentle. "She was a nice woman, really. A bit lonely and sentimental, but she meant well. *She* never harmed me." She flicked her eyes towards Eleanor, who was smiling secretively to herself.

"Is old Gardner still alive?"

"Frances, don't be silly," said Di. "Of course she's still alive. She's only just retired."

"Poisonous woman," said Jill. "Sarcasm an art form. Come unto me and be humiliated. You're surely not going to defend her too?"

"Oh no." Sarah shook her head.

"She had a warped mind," said Frances. "Maybe she couldn't help it."

"You have too much capacity for charity," said Jill impatiently. "Of course she could help it. She *enjoyed* it."

Di looked thoughtful. "Maybe she is dead. Maybe somebody murdered her. I'm sure that would surprise no one."

It was then that the dominant issue in everyone's mind, the focal point of the reunion, came to the fore, and stopped their mouths. The ghastly silence went on and on. The only one who was at all comfortable with it was Sarah, whose experience of ghastly silences had made her expert in handling them. Sometimes she managed to joke, or otherwise put people at their ease. Sometimes she affected a quiet heroism that shamed them and made them rush to protect her. This time she let them sweat.

It was fully two minutes before Eleanor leaned forward in her chair and spoke, with a sincerity that wouldn't quite meet Sarah's eye.

"It's silly not to mention it, because we all followed the case in the paper, and we just felt so dreadfully sorry at your having to go through all that."

Sarah smiled. Her own calmness on these occasions still surprised her. "Well, it's good of you to say so, though actually, of course, your support was not offered when I could have used it. Frances was the only one of all my old school buddies who bothered to write." She

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turned to Frances, who had gone pink and was studying the floor.

"I really appreciated your letter, Frances. I'm sorry I didn't reply. I just found it too difficult."

"You weren't supposed to, honestly, Sarah. It was just to say—you know—"

"Yes, I do know, and thank you." She looked at the others. "As for the rest of you, I know perfectly well you still can't make up your minds whether or not I killed my mother."

There was a horrified outcry.

Sarah laughed. "Don't be so scandalised. People do kill their parents. And their children. And their siblings. I could quote you lots of statistics."

"Yes, but you didn't," said Frances hotly. "And it's dreadful that you feel we might doubt you."

"Well, thank you for your vote of confidence."

After that there was a succession of questions, on topics varying from how it felt to be arrested, to the state of the nation's prisons; from the behaviour of the police to whether or not she thought the law was an ass. Their defence of her was absolute, though she knew with a cool certainty that it would not have held up if she had been convicted. There would have been no letters to Westminster, no Save Sarah Sim demonstrations. It was expedient for them now to attest to her innocence, but she knew all about their reservations. Later, when she excused herself from the room, she heard the hum of voices continue their discussion in her absence, particularly Eleanor's smug complacent tones, which made her smile. For all she had answered their questions, and they would go home filled with self-righteousness and self-importance to spread the word, they knew nothing of her deepest feelings, nothing of her anguish or her fears.

It was ten o'clock the following day that Sarah heard the news about Eleanor. The announcer himself was thunderstruck, as though he was going to have a hard time explaining to his own offspring why there would be no more Mrs. Tansy stories, no more tales from Teasel Tops. The report was formally worded—there was a mention of head injuries—but reading between the lines, the great British Public could tell that their very favourite writer of children's stories had met an untimely and brutal end, had in fact had her head bashed in. Standing by her kitchen sink, Sarah found her eyes seeking out the radio, as though if she didn't watch she might miss something of great import, like who had killed her.

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Shortly afterwards, Frances phoned, beside herself with panic and outrage, as well as grief for Eleanor.

"The police will be here soon, I know they will. They'll think it was me!"

"Frances, for heaven's sake, calm down. It was obviously someone caught trying to burgle the place. Why on earth should anyone suspect you?"

Frances hiccupped. "Because I was the last to leave. Last night."

"Ah."

"You went first, then Di and Jill, and I stayed because Eleanor was still in a chatty mood. I stayed till nearly one, and I only left then because I know John worries if I'm driving around late at night. Eleanor would have gone on chatting till dawn." She sniffed. "I think she's quite lonely, sometimes. Was, I mean. Was lonely. And Tim's being away so much doesn't help. Didn't. Oh God."

Sarah noticed abstractedly how much people worried about tenses at a moment like this.

"Just the fact that you were last to leave still doesn't make you a suspect, Fran. Be reasonable. No one in their right mind would think you capable of murder."

"They thought you were."

Sarah paused. "That was different. For all sorts of reasons."

"Do you think the police will know? That we were there, I mean?"

"If they don't, they'll find out."

"And they'll question us?"

"Oh yes. You can't expect to avoid that."

Frances broke into fresh wails.

"Frances, for God's sake, you didn't *do* anything. Did you?"

"Of course not. I just feel—well—so sorry for her." There was another bout of weeping, amidst which Sarah did detect a genuine grief for Eleanor herself. "There she was, having a nice party—and—oh Sarah, it's ghastly. I do hope she didn't suffer."

Sarah bit her tongue on the savage rejoinder, "I hope she bloody well did."

"Do you think—do you think it *could* have been one of us?"

Sarah paused. "Technically, yes."

"But *why* would anyone do it?"

"Think about it. Each one of us had a reason. It doesn't have to be a good reason. Murders are often committed for causes others would consider trivial."

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Like rejection. Like spurned affection. Like love turned to rage and allowed to fester for ten years.

"But—but Sarah!" Frances was aghast. "You seriously believe—?"

"No, of course I don't. I'm just saying what the police will say. That it's feasible. But not very probable. It's far more likely to be a burglary gone wrong. The place was stiff with valuables. You saw that yourself."

"Yes."

"So calm down. It could even have been one of those religious nuts from along the road. These types are notoriously unstable."

"Yes. I suppose so. I wish—I just wish—"

"What?"

"That I'd stayed with her," she said in a rush. "I could have done. I could have phoned John and stayed with Eleanor. She was lonely, I know she was. What's the point of being rich and famous if you've no real friends?"

"What indeed."

"Oh, I *wish* I'd stayed."

The police came later in the day. Detective Inspector Wyllie was tall, ascetic, cold, with grey eyes and prematurely grey hair. His sergeant was younger, eager to learn at the feet of the master. Sarah's experience of policemen was encyclopedic, but she hadn't met this one before.

"I believe you spent the evening with Mrs. English."

"That's correct."

"At what time did you leave?"

"About half past eleven, I think."

"Were you the first to go?"

"Yes."

"And where did you go when you left?" The grey eyes revealed nothing.

"I went home. To bed."

"Can anyone vouch for that?"

"The neighbours might have seen me, but I doubt it. Otherwise no one."

Here we go again, she thought, and for the next half-hour she fielded all the obvious questions. The sergeant wrote her answers down.

"Would you say, Miss Sim, that Mrs. English was security conscious? Did she take care to lock her doors and windows?"

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"Yes, she did."

"So a casual intruder would find it difficult to get in?"

"I imagine so. But I don't know, Inspector."

"Of course, you don't. Tell me, did you happen to notice what kind of lock the back door had?"

She thought. "No, I didn't."

"Would you like me to tell you what I think happened, Miss Sim?"

"By all means, Inspector. If you want to tell me."

"Oh, I do. I want to nail whoever did this, Miss Sim. My nieces will never forgive me if I don't pull it off." He smiled bleakly. Sarah said nothing. "I think that one of you ladies did it."

"Oh? How, exactly?"

"Simple, really. If it was your friend Frances, there's no problem. She was the last to leave. If it was one of the rest of you, you made sure the back door was unlocked on the inside, which could have been done at any point in the evening, drove off in your little car, and parked it somewhere secluded. You then walked back, waited till everyone had left, and came in the door. I can only speculate on what kind of confrontation took place, if any. Maybe you just waltzed up behind Mrs. English and whacked her over the head."

"I don't care for your use of the second person, Inspector."

"I'm sorry. I'll change to 'one.' One waltzed up and whacked her on the head. Does that sound better? Yes, perhaps it does. It has a kind of royal flavour to it."

"It sounds silly," said Sarah waspishly.

"Yes. Well. Shall I continue? I know you'll want to ask about the weapon. Terribly dull, I'm afraid. It's the old blunt instrument, probably taken away by the murderer or otherwise disposed of."

"How?"

"Burned, Miss Sim. There was a log fire burning. Perhaps you didn't notice."

She stared into the cold grey eyes. "What kind of weapon burns, Inspector?"

"How about a log of wood, Miss Sim?"

"Wouldn't that leave traces on the victim?"

"Not if dropped in a polythene bag. It would leave no traces on the victim or the killer. Polythene is marvellous stuff, don't you think? It burns, too. Not always entirely, of course. My officers are looking for fragments even as we speak. What do you think of my scenario so far?"

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"Have you put this—scenario—to all the rest, the other guests last night?"

"Oh, of course. Their amazement at my perspicacity was very rewarding. But you haven't answered my question, Miss Sim. What do you think of my theory?"

She smiled thinly. "It's impressive, but circumstantial. You have no proof, and so far you haven't mentioned motive."

"Ah yes. Motive." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands over his stomach. "So far I've come up with quite a selection. Envy, for one. An oldie but a goodie. And then there's sexual jealousy—even better. And revenge for past offences. Nothing very novel, I'm afraid."

She said nothing.

"I think it was one of those crimes committed on the spur of the moment because the occasion presented itself. Tell me, what were your own feelings for Mrs. English?"

She shrugged. "I was quite fond of her. We were close friends at school, but I haven't seen much of her since."

"Why not?"

"I suppose our lives went in separate directions. Eleanor married and had her family, and took to writing in a big way. I worked abroad a lot of the time. These things happen."

He nodded. "True enough. Well, Miss Sim, thank you for talking to me." He stood up. There was a cold intelligence behind the smiling grey eyes. "I'll call again."

"Will you?"

"Oh yes." The smile broadened. "Oh, I think so."

She took a fit of shaking after he left, but ten minutes later she had regained control. It was all starting again, the accusations, the harassment, the questions, the endless repeated questions. But she would weather it. She could feel exhilaration taking over from panic as she mentally girded herself for the fight. She would take them on again, the courts, the public, the press, and she would win. After all, she was an old campaigner. She had done it before. And she would do it again. She would get away with murder.

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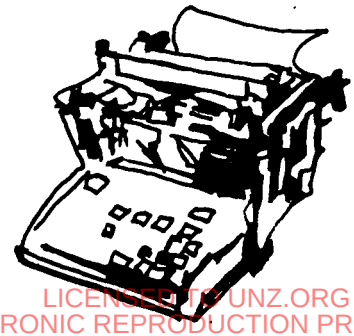
ON OUR COVER

Tony Hillerman is one of that exceptional group of writers working in the mystery field whose books are of such high literary quality that they appeal as strongly to readers who would ordinarily never pick up a mystery as to the die-hard fans. The books reflect the author's interest in spiritual and religious questions, as well as social and economic problems, and they present a profoundly sensitive and accurate portrait of the Navajo people, amongst whom the author has maintained close friendships for most of his life.

Mr. Hillerman's appreciation of Indian cultures began to form in childhood when as a grammar-school student he was sent to St. Mary's Academy near Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, a boarding school attended primarily by Potowatamie and Seminole girls. It was not until many years later, however, that he began to treat Navajo culture in his writing. In the years before the publication of Mr. Hillerman's first novel, *The Blessing Way,* the book that introduced Navajo policeman Lieutenant Joe Leghorn, Mr. Hillerman worked first as a reporter and editor for a variety of newspapers in the southwest, and later as a professor of journalism.

In an age in which publishers increasingly look for formulas for success, Tony Hillerman represents something of an anomaly. Rarely do books as reflective as the Leghorn series make the best-seller lists; rarely does one find an author so unaffected by commercial success. The Hillerman's continue to live modestly in Albuquerque, New Mexico, their values centering on friends and family.

Last year an important member of that family, Tony Hillerman's older brother Barney, a professional photographer, died while working on a photo shoot; it is his work that we feature on our cover this month. A splendid collection of Barney Hillerman's photographs, entitled *Hillerman Country,* is available from HarperCollins.



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a *NEW* Gordianus story by

STEVEN SAYLOR

One of the delights of the Gordianus stories is their frequent allusions to the literary and cultural interests of the period (the first century B.C.), as in the present story, in which the Virgo Maxima instructs Gordianus about an author very dear to her heart, the great female lyric poet Sappho. Writing in the sixth century B.C., Sappho is believed to have been married and to have had a daughter, but her poems were characterized by passion, and at the same time a kind of stoicism, qualities the Vestal Licinia takes as her guide when a murderer violates the sanctity of the House of the Vestals . . .

THE HOUSE OF THE VESTALS

by STEVEN SAYLOR

"What do you know about the Vestal Virgins?" said Cicero.

"Only what every Roman knows: that there are six of them; that they watch over the eternal flame in the temple of Vesta; that they serve for no less than thirty years, during which time they take a vow of chastity. And that once every generation or so a terrible scandal erupts—"

"Yes, yes," said Cicero. The litter gave a small lurch, pitching him forward. It was a moonless night, and the litter-bearers, proceeding over the rough paving stones by torchlight, were giving us a bumpy ride. "I bring up the matter only because one never knows nowadays, we live in such irreligious times. Not that I myself set any store by mindless superstition . . ."

The sharpest mind in Rome was rambling. Cicero was uncommonly agitated.

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He had arrived at my door in the middle of the night, called me from my bed, and insisted I accompany him to an unspecified destination. I might have refused, except that I have never refused one of his summonses in the seven years since I first assisted him in the case of Sextus Roscius. The streets of the city are unsafe at night, but his retinue included an adequate number of bodyguards. Moreover, the household coffers were dangerously low, and Cicero pays exceedingly well.

The bearers trotted along at a quick pace, jostling us about; I would almost have preferred to get out and trot myself. I parted the curtains and peered outside. Within the covered box I had lost my bearings; the darkened street looked like any other. "Where are we going, Cicero?"

He ignored my question. "As you noted earlier, Gordianus, the Vestals are particularly vulnerable to scandal. You have heard, no doubt, of the pending case against Marcus Crassus?"

"It's the talk of every tavern in town. The richest man in Rome is accused of corrupting a Vestal. And not just any Vestal, but Licinia herself."

"Yes, the Virgo Maxima, high priestess of Vesta and a distant cousin of Crassus. The charge is absurd, of course. Crassus is no more likely to involve himself in such an affair than I would be. Like myself, and unlike so many of our contemporaries, he is above the base appetites of the flesh. Even so, there are plenty of witnesses ready to testify that he has been seen in Licinia's company on numerous occasions—at the theater during festivals, in the Forum—hovering about her in an unseemly fashion, appearing almost to badger her. I am told also that circumstantial evidence exists to indicate he has visited her, during daylight hours, in the House of the Vestals, without chaperones present. Even so, there is no crime in that, unless poor judgment is a crime. Men hate Crassus only because he's made himself so rich. That, too, is not a crime . . ."

The great mind had begun to wander again. The hour, after all, was late. I cleared my throat. "Will you be defending Crassus in the courts? Or Licinia?"

"Neither! My political career has entered a very delicate phase. I cannot be seen to have any public connection with a scandal involving the Vestals. Which is why the events of this evening are such a disaster!"

At last, I thought, we shall get down to business. I peered between the curtains again. It seemed that we were approaching the Forum.

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What possible business could we have among the temples and markets in the middle of the night?

"As you probably know, Gordianus, one of the younger Vestals happens to be a relative of mine."

"No, I didn't know."

"A relative by marriage, anyway; Fabia is my wife's half-sister, and therefore my sister-in-law."

"But the Vestal under investigation is Licinia," I said.

"Yes, the scandal involved only Licinia . . . until the events of this evening."

"Cicero, are you being deliberately obscure?"

"Very well. Something occurred earlier tonight in the House of the Vestals. Something quite terrible. Unthinkable! Something that threatens not only to destroy Fabia, but to throw calumny upon the very institution of the Vestals, and to undermine the whole religious establishment of Rome." Cicero lowered his voice, which had begun to rise to orator's pitch. "I have no doubt that the prosecution of Licinia and Crassus is somehow related to this latest disaster; there is an organized conspiracy afoot to spread doubt and chaos in the city, using the Vestals as a starting point. If my years in the Forum have taught me anything, it is that Roman politicians will stop at nothing!"

He leaned forward and clutched my arm. "You are aware that this year marks the tenth anniversary of the fire that razed the Temple of Jupiter and destroyed the Sibylline oracles? The masses are superstitious, Gordianus; they are quite ready to believe that on the tenth anniversary of such a terrible catastrophe, something equally terrible must occur. Now it has. Whether it has been manufactured by gods or by men is the question."

The litter gave a final lurch and came to a halt. Cicero released his grip on my arm, sat back, and sighed. "We have reached your destination."

I pulled back the curtains and saw the colonnaded facade of the House of the Vestals.

"Cicero, I may not be an expert in religious matters, but I do know that for a man to enter the House of the Vestals after dark is an offense punishable by death. I hope you don't expect me to—"

"Tonight is not like other nights, Gordianus."

"Cicero! Back at last!" The voice from the darkness was oddly familiar. A shock of red hair entered the circle of torchlight and I recognized young Marcus Valerius Messalla Rufus, called Rufus on

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account of his flaming hair, whom I had not seen, close at hand, in the seven years since he had assisted Cicero with the defense of Sextus Roscius. He had been only sixteen then, a boy with red cheeks and a freckled nose; now he was a religious official, one of the youngest men ever elected to the College of Augurs, entrusted with interpreting the will of the gods by reading omens in lightning and the flights of birds. He still looked very much like a boy to me. In spite of the obvious gravity of the moment, his eyes shone brightly and he smiled as he stepped toward Cicero and took his hand. It seemed that his unrequited and secret love for his mentor had not diminished over the years.

"Rufus will take you from here," said Cicero.

"What? You've roused me from bed in the middle of the night, carried me halfway across Rome, given me no clear explanation, and now you abandon me?"

"I thought I made it quite clear that I must have no connection whatsoever with tonight's events. Fabia called on her fellow Vestal Licinia for help, who called on Rufus, who is known to her; together they summoned me, knowing my family connection to Fabia; I fetched you, Gordianus—and that is the end of my involvement." He gestured impatiently for me to step from the litter. As soon as my feet touched the paving stones, without even pausing for farewells, he clapped his hands and the litter lurched into motion. Rufus and I watched it depart in the direction of Cicero's house on the Capitoline Hill.

"There goes an extraordinary man," sighed Rufus. I was thinking something quite different, but bit my tongue. The litter turned a corner and disappeared from sight.

Before us was the entrance to the House of the Vestals. Twin braziers stood at either side, flickering bars of shadow danced across the wide, steep stairway. But the house itself was dark, its high wooden doors thrown shut. Normally they stood open, day and night—for who would dare to enter the abode of the Vestals uninvited or with evil intent? Across the way, the round Temple of Vesta was strangely lit up, and from it came a soft chanting on the still night air.

"Gordianus!" said Rufus. "How strange to see you again, after so many years. I hear of you now and again—"

"As I hear of you, and see you occasionally, presiding at some public or private invocation of the auspices. Nothing important can

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happen in Rome without an augur present to read the omens. You must stay very busy."

He shrugged. "There are fifteen augurs in all, Gordianus. I'm the youngest, and only a beginner. Many of the mysteries are still just that to me—mysteries."

"Lightning on the left, good; lightning on the right, bad. And if the person you're divining for is displeased with the result, you have only to face the opposite direction, reversing right and left. It seems rather simple."

Rufus compressed his lips. "I see that you're as skeptical of religion as Cicero. Yes, a great deal of it is empty formula and politics. But there is another element, the perception of which requires, I suppose, a certain sensibility on the part of the perceiver."

"And do you foresee lightning tonight?" I said, sniffing the air.

He smiled faintly. "Actually, yes, I think it may rain. But we mustn't stand here talking, where anyone could see us. Come along." He started up the steps.

"Into the House of the Vestals? At this hour?"

"The Virgo Maxima herself is awaiting us, Gordianus. Come along!"

I followed him dubiously up the stairs. He knocked softly on one of the doors, which swung silently inward. I stepped over the threshold.

We stood in a lofty foyer that opened onto a central courtyard, surrounded all about by a colonnaded walkway. All was dark; not a single torch was lit. The octagonal pool in the center of the courtyard was black and full of stars, its glassy surface broken only by the reeds that grew from the center.

I felt a sudden superstitious dread. Hackles rose on the back of my neck, a sheen of sweat erupted on my forehead, and I was unable to breathe. My heart pounded until I was sure the noise was loud enough to wake a sleeping virgin. I wanted to clutch Rufus's arm and hiss into his ear that we must go back to the Forum *at once,* so deep is fear of the forbidden ingrained from childhood, when one hears tales of men found skulking in sacred precincts and made to suffer unimaginable punishments. Of course, I ruefully reflected, it is only through association with the most respectable people in the world—people like Cicero and Rufus—that a man can suddenly, unexpectedly find himself in the most forbidden spot in all of Rome, at an hour when his mere presence could mean death. One moment, innocently asleep in my own bed, and the next—in the House of the Vestals!

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There was a faint noise behind us and I turned to see a vague white shape in the darkness, which by degrees resolved itself into a woman. She must have opened the door for us, but she was not a slave. She was one of the Vestals, as I could tell by her appearance. Her hair was cut quite short, and around her forehead she wore a broad white band like a diadem, decorated with ribbons. She was dressed in a plain white stola, and about her shoulders she wore the white linen mantle of the Vestals.

She pulled back her hand as if to throw something, and an instant later I felt drops of water on my face. "Be purified," she whispered. "Do you swear by the goddess of the hearth that you enter this house with no evil intent, and at the request of the mistress of this house, who is the Virgo Maxima, the highest priestess of Vesta?"

"I do," said Rufus. I quickly followed his example.

The Vestal led us across the courtyard. As we passed the pool I heard a soft splash. I stiffened at the noise but saw only a gentle ripple traverse the black surface, causing the reflected starlight to glimmer and wink. I leaned close to Rufus's ear and whispered: "A frog?"

"But surely not a male one!" he whispered back, then gestured for me to be quiet.

We stepped beneath the colonnade, into deep shadow, and stopped before a door that was invisible except for the faint bar of light that escaped beneath its bottom edge. The Vestal knocked very gently and whispered something I couldn't hear, then left us and disappeared into the shadows. A moment later the door opened inward and a face appeared, frightened, beautiful, and quite young. She, too, wore the diadem of a Vestal.

She pulled the door open for us to enter. The room was dimly lit by a single lamp, beneath which another Vestal sat holding an open scroll. She was older than her companion, of middle age. Her short hair was touched with silver at the temples. As we approached, she kept her eyes on the scroll and began to read aloud in Greek. Her voice was soft and mellow:

> "Evening star, gatherer of all
> The bright daybreak parted:
> You gather the sheep, the goat;
> You gather the child safe to its mother."

She laid the scroll aside and looked up, first at Rufus, then at me. She sighed. "In time of distress, the poetess comforts me. Are you familiar with Sappho?"

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"A little," I said.

She laid the scroll aside. "I am Licinia."

I looked at her more closely. Was this the woman for whom the richest man in Rome had endangered his life? She was in no way extraordinary, at least not to my eye; on the other hand, what sort of woman could sit and read poetry in the midst of what even staid Cicero had decreed a catastrophe?

"You are Gordianus, called The Finder?" she said.

I nodded.

"Cicero sent word by Rufus that you would come. Ah, what would we have done tonight without Cicero to help us?"

" 'Like is he to a god immortal,' " quoted Rufus. "Cicero," he explained, at my look of consternation. "Another line from Sappho . . ." His voice grew tiny and trailed away. An uneasy silence filled the room. The girl who had opened the door remained in the shadows.

"Let's get on with it, then," said Licinia. "You must know already that I have been indicted for conduct forbidden to a Vestal. They accuse me of a dalliance with my kinsman Marcus Crassus."

"So I have heard."

"I'm far past my youth, and have no interest in men—the charge is absurd! It is true that Crassus seeks out my company in the Forum and the theater and pesters me constantly, but if our accusers only knew what he talks about when we're alone! Believe me, it has nothing to do with matters of the heart. Crassus is as legendary for his greed as are the Vestals for their chastity—but I will not elaborate. Crassus has his defense and I have mine, and in three days the courts will hear our cases and decide. There are no witnesses and no evidence of any act contrary to my vow. The suit is nothing more than a nuisance intended to embarrass Crassus, and incidentally to undermine the people's faith in the Vestals. No reasonable panel of judges could possibly find us guilty; and yet, after the events of this evening, things could go very badly for us both."

She looked into the darkness and frowned, and caressed the scroll in her lap, as if the conversation had grown distasteful to her and she longed to escape again into the soothing rhythms of the poet. When she spoke again, her voice was languid and dreamy.

"I was consecrated to Vesta at the age of eight. All Vestals are chosen at an early age, between six and ten. We serve for no less than thirty years. For the first ten years, we are novices, students of the mysteries like Fabia here." She gestured to the girl in the shadows. "In the second ten years we perform the sacred duties:

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purify the shrine and make offerings of salt, watch over the eternal flame, consecrate temples, attend the holy festivals, guard the sacred relics. In the last ten years, we become teachers and instruct the novices, passing on the mysteries. At the end of thirty years we are permitted to leave the consecrated life, but the few who choose to do so almost always end in misery." She sighed. "Within the House of the Vestals a woman acquires certain habits and expectations, falls into certain rhythms incompatible with life outside. Most Vestals die as they have lived, in chaste service to the goddess and her everlasting hearth.

"Sometimes . . ." Her voice quavered. "Sometimes, especially in the early years, one can be tempted to stray from the vow of chastity. You know the consequence of that: death, and not a simple, merciful death, but a fate quite horrible to contemplate.

"The last such scandal occurred forty years ago. The mere mention of it in this house still causes lamentation. Do you know the story? The virgin daughter of a good family was struck by lightning and killed. Her clothing was rent and her nakedness exposed; soothsayers interpreted this to mean that the Vestals had violated their vows. Three Vestals were accused of impurity, along with their alleged paramours, and tried before the College of Pontiffs. One was found guilty. The others were absolved. But the people were not satisfied. They raged and rioted until a special commission was set up. The case was retried. All three Vestals were condemned."

Licinia's face grew long. Her eyes glinted in the lamplight. "Do you know the punishment, Gordianus? The paramour is publicly scourged to death; a gruesome matter, but simple and quick. Not so with the Vestal. She is stripped of her diadem and linen mantle. She is whipped by the Pontifex Maximus. She is dressed like a corpse, laid in a closed litter, and carried through the Forum attended by her weeping kindred, forced to live through the misery of her own funeral. She is carried to a place just inside the Colline Gate, where a small vault is prepared underground, containing a couch, a lamp, and a table with a little food. A common executioner guides her down the ladder into the cell, but he does not harm her. You see, her person is still sacred to Vesta; she cannot be killed outright. The ladder is drawn up, the vault sealed, the ground leveled. It is left to the goddess to take the Vestal's life . . ."

"*Buried alive!*" Fabia whispered hoarsely. The girl remained in the shadows, her hands now nervously touching her lips.

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"Yes, buried alive . . ." Licinia's voice was steady, but cold as death. After a long moment, she glanced down at her lap, where the scroll of Sappho lay crushed in her hand.

"I think it is time now to explain to Gordianus why he was called here." She put aside the scroll and stood. "An intruder entered this house earlier tonight. More precisely, two intruders, possibly more. A man came to visit Fabia after dark; on her invitation, he claims—"

"Never!" said the girl.

Licinia silenced her with a withering look. "He was discovered in her room. But worse than that—you shall see for yourself, Gordianus."

She picked up the lamp and led us through a short passageway to another room. It was a simpler and more private chamber than the one in which she had greeted us. Ornamental curtains draped the walls, their color a rich, dark red that seemed to swallow the light of the brazier in one corner. There were only two pieces of furniture, a backless chair and a sleeping couch. The couch, I noticed, looked freshly made up, its pillows fluffed and straightened, its coverlets neatly spread. The man who sat in the chair looked up as we entered. Contrary to fashion, he was not clean-shaven but wore a neat little beard. It seemed to me that he smiled very faintly.

He appeared to be a few years younger than myself, about thirty-five, I guessed, close to Cicero's age. Unlike Cicero, he was quite remarkably attractive. Which is not to say that he was particularly handsome. If I conjure up his features in my mind's eye, I can only remark that his hair and beard were dark, his eyes a piercing blue, his features regular. But in his actual presence there was something indefinably appealing, and a contagious playfulness in his eyes that seemed to dance like sparkling points of flame.

"Lucius Sergius Catilina," he said, standing and introducing himself.

The patrician clan of the Sergii went back to the days of Aeneas; there was no more respectable name in the Republic. Catilina himself I knew only by his reputation, which varied according to the source. Some called him a charmer, others a rogue. All agreed that he was clever, but some said too clever.

He gave me an odd half-smile that suggested he was inwardly laughing at something—but at what? He cocked his head. "Tell me, Gordianus, what do five of the people in this room have in common?"

Puzzled, I glanced at Rufus, who scowled.

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"They are still *breathing,*" said Catilina, "while the sixth . . . is not!" He stepped toward the curtain hung across the far wall and pulled it back to reveal another passageway. Upon the floor, contorted in a most unnatural way, lay the body of a man who was surely dead.

Rufus and Licinia looked sternly disapproving of Catilina's theatricality, while Fabia was close to tears, but none of them betrayed surprise. I drew in a breath, then knelt and studied the crumpled body for a long moment.

I drew back and sat in the chair, feeling slightly ill. The sight of a man with his throat cut is never pleasant.

"This is why you called me here, Licinia? This is the disaster Cicero spoke of?"

"A murder in the House of the Vestals," she whispered. "Unheard of sacrilege! In a few hours, all Rome will know of it."

I fought back my queasiness. Rufus had produced a cup of wine, which he pressed into my hand. I gratefully drank it down.

"I think we had best begin at the beginning," I said. "What in Jupiter's name are you doing here, Catilina?"

He cleared his throat and swallowed. A smile flickered on his lips and vanished, as if it were only a nervous tic. "Fabia summoned me; or at least that's what I thought."

"How so?"

"I received this, earlier tonight." He produced a scrap of folded parchment:

> COME AT ONCE TO MY ROOM IN THE HOUSE OF THE VESTALS. DO NOT REGARD THE DANGER, I BEG YOU. MY HONOR IS AT STAKE AND I DARE NOT CONFIDE IN ANYONE ELSE. ONLY YOU CAN HELP ME. DESTROY THIS NOTE AFTER YOU HAVE READ IT. FABIA

I pondered it for a while. "Did you send this note, Fabia?"

"Never!"

"How was it delivered to you, Catilina?"

"A messenger came to my house on the Palatine, a hired boy from the streets."

"Are you in the habit of receiving messages from Vestals?"

"Not at all."

"Yet you believed this message to be genuine. Were you not surprised to receive such an intimate communication from a Vestal?"

He smiled indulgently. "The Vestals live a chaste life, Gordianus, not a secluded one. It shouldn't surprise you that I know Fabia. We

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are both from ancient families. We have met at the theater, in the Forum, at private dinners. I have even, though rarely, and always in daylight and in the presence of chaperones, visited her here in the House of the Vestals; we share an interest in Greek poets and Arretine vases. Our behavior in public has always been above reproach. Yes, I was surprised to receive her message, but only because it was so alarming."

"Yet you chose to do as it requested—to come here in the middle of the night, to flout the laws of men and gods?"

He laughed softly, and the blackness of his beard made his smile all the more dazzling. "Really, Gordianus, what better excuse to break those laws could a man ever hope for than to come to the rescue of a Vestal in distress? I'm not a man to refuse a challenge, or pass up an opportunity for adventure. Of course I came!" Then his face grew sober. "I realize now that I probably did not come alone."

"You were followed?"

"At the time, I wasn't sure; walking alone in Rome at night, one tends to see lurkers in the shadows. But yes, looking back, I think I may have been followed."

"By one man, or many?"

He shrugged.

"By *this* man?" I indicated the corpse.

Catilina shrugged again. "I have never seen him before."

"He's certainly dressed for stalking—a black cloak with a black hood to cover his head. Where is the weapon that killed him?"

"Did you not see it?" He pushed back the curtains again and indicated a dagger that lay in a pool of blood farther down the passage. I fetched a lamp and examined it.

"A very nasty-looking blade, as long as a man's hand and half as wide, so sharp that even through the blood it glitters. Your knife Catilina?"

"Of course not! I didn't kill him."

"Then who did?"

"If we knew that, you wouldn't be here!" He rolled his eyes and then smiled as sweetly as a child. At that moment I could not imagine him slitting another man's throat.

"If this dagger doesn't belong to you, Catilina, then where is your knife?"

"I have no knife."

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"What? You went walking across Rome on a moonless night and carried no weapon?"

He nodded.

"Catilina, how am I to believe you?"

"Believe me, or not. It's only a short walk here from my house, through what is, after all, one of the better neighborhoods in the city. I don't like to carry a knife. I'm always cutting my fingers." The half-smile flickered on his lips again, and I couldn't tell whether he was joking or not.

"Perhaps you should continue with your story of the night's events. A fabricated note summoned you here. You arrived at the entrance—"

"—to find the doors, as always, open wide. I must admit, it took some courage to step across the threshold, but all was quiet and so far as I could tell no one saw me. I have some knowledge of the layout of this place. I came directly to this room and found Fabia sitting in her chair, reading. She seemed surprised to see me, I must admit."

"You must believe him," said Fabia, speaking chiefly to Licinia. "I would never have sent such a note. I had no idea he was coming."

"And then what happened?" I said.

Catilina shrugged. "We shared a quiet laugh together."

"You found the situation funny?"

"Why not? I'm always playing jokes on my friends, and they on me. I assumed that one of them had tricked me into coming here, of all places. You must agree it's rich!"

"Except that I see a dead body before me."

"Yes, that," he said, wrinkling his nose. "I was preparing to go—oh yes, I lingered for a few moments, savoring the danger of the situation; what man would not?—and then there came a terrible cry from behind that curtain. The sort of sound a man makes, I suppose, when he's having his throat cut. I pulled back the curtain, and there he was, writhing on the floor."

"You saw no sign of the murderer?"

"Only the knife on the floor, still spinning about in that pool of blood."

"You didn't pursue the killer?"

"I confess that I was paralyzed with shock. A few moments later, of course, the Vestals began arriving."

"The scream was heard all over the house," said Licinia. "I arrived first. The others came soon after."

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"And what did you see?"

"The body, of course; and Fabia and Catilina huddled together . . ."

"Can you be more precise?"

"I don't understand."

"Licinia, you force me to be crude. How were they dressed?"

"Why, exactly as they are now! Catilina in his tunic, Fabia in her vestments."

"And the bed—"

"—was just as you see it: unslept in. If you are insinuating—"

"I insinuate nothing, Licinia. I only wish to see the event exactly as it occurred."

"And quite a sight it was," said Catilina, his eyelids droopy. "A bloody corpse, a dagger, six Vestals swooning all around—what an extraordinary moment, when you think of it! How many men can claim to have been at the center of such a wild and sensual tableau?"

"Catilina, you are absurd!" said Rufus.

"No one saw the killer escaping? Neither you, Licinia, nor any of the others?"

"No. To be sure, the courtyard was dark, as it is now. But I lost no time in sending one of the slave girls to close and bar the door."

"Then it's possible you trapped the villain here in the house?"

"So I hoped. But we have searched the premises already and found no one."

"Then he escaped; unless, of course, Catilina invented him altogether . . ."

"No!" cried Fabia. "Catilina speaks the truth. It happened just as he says."

Catilina turned up his palms and raised his eyebrows. "There you have it, Gordianus. Would a Vestal lie?"

"Catilina, this is not a joke. You must realize how the circumstances appear. Who else but you, Catilina, had cause to murder this intruder?"

To this he had no reply.

"I'm no expert in religious law," I said, "but it's hard to imagine a more serious offense than committing murder in the House of the Vestals. Even if you can somehow explain away your presence here tonight—and few judges will find a forged note or a practical joke an adequate excuse—the fact of the corpse remains. In an ordinary murder case, a Roman citizen has the option of fleeing to some foreign land rather than face trial and punishment, but when dese-

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cration is involved, the authorities have no option for leniency. Unless of course you flee the city tonight . . ."

He fixed me with a steady gaze. His eyes seemed impossibly blue, as if blue flames danced behind them. "Though I may joke and make riddles, Gordianus, never doubt that I understand the circumstance in which I find myself. No, I will not flee Rome like a frightened cur and leave a young Vestal to face a charge of iniquity alone."

In the shadows, Fabia began to weep.

Catilina bit his lips. "If this was more than a practical joke—and the corpse is proof of that—then I think I might know who is behind it."

"That would be a start. Who?"

"The same man who is behind the prosecution against Licinia and Crassus. His name is Clodius. You know him?"

"I know of him, certainly. A rabble-rouser, troublemaker—"

"And a personal enemy of mine. Scheming, scheming all the time. A man of such moral character as would have no qualms about involving the Vestal Virgins in a plot to bring down his enemies."

"So you suspect this Clodius of luring you here with a bogus message, and of having you followed. But why would he send his man in after you? Why not raise the alarm outside the house? We still have no motive for the man's murder."

Catilina shrugged. "I can tell you no more."

I shook my head. "I'll do what I can, which is very little. I'll want to question the other Vestals and whatever slaves were in the house tonight; that can wait for morning. I may be able to track down the boy who brought you that message, and thus trace it back to Clodius, or whomever. I may be able to ferret out the man or men who followed you on your way here tonight, if they exist. They might be induced to tell what they know about the dead man and his reason for being here—I might uncover something of use for your defense, Catilina. Still, it looks bad. I see nothing more to do tonight, except to make another search of the premises."

"We searched already, and found nothing," Licinia said.

"But we can search again," said Fabia. "Please, Virgo Maxima?"

"Very well," said Licinia sternly. "Summon some of the slave girls and see that they're armed with knives from the kitchens. We will look again in every crevice and urn."

"I'll come with you," said Catilina. "To protect you," he added, looking at Fabia. "The man we are looking for is a desperate murderer, after all."

Licinia scowled, but did not protest.

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In the courtyard, beneath the colonnade, I paused to let my eyes adjust to the darkness. Rufus bumped against me. I stumbled and kicked a pebble that skittered across the stones. The sound seemed loud in the stillness. From the pool came a tiny splash.

Only a frog, I thought. But the noise startled me and made my heart race. I saw phantoms in the shadows and shook my head at such imaginings. In just such a way, I thought, Catilina might have imagined being followed by men who were not there. Even so, I felt in some way that Rufus and I were not alone in the courtyard. The faint chanting of the Vestals from the nearby temple seemed to hover in the still air above. I sat on a bench close by the reeds at the edge of the pond and gazed at the stars that spangled its black surface.

Rufus sat beside me. "What do you think, Gordianus?"

"I think we are in deep waters."

"Do you believe Catilina?"

"Do you?"

"Not for a moment! The man is false to the core, all charm and no substance."

"Ah, you compare him to a man like Cicero, perhaps, and find him wanting."

"Exactly."

"And yet it seems entirely within his character to respond to such a reckless letter for adventure's sake, does it not? That part of the story seems credible; or is he so devious as to devise such a letter beforehand to use as a ruse if needed?"

"He's certainly wicked enough!"

"I think not. As for his innocence of the murder, I'm haunted by his detail of finding the knife still spinning about in the pool of blood. It seems too striking and odd a detail to be invented on the spot."

"You underestimate his cleverness, Gordianus."

"Or perhaps you underestimate his nobleness. What if it was Fabia who murdered the intruder and Catilina lies to protect her?"

"Now *that* is truly absurd, Gordianus! The girl is frail and timid—"

"And very much in love. Did you not see that, Rufus? Might she have killed in a frenzy to protect her lover?"

"This is too fantastic, Gordianus."

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"Perhaps you're right. It's the murmur of distant chanting and the pool full of stars that carry me away. I even find myself considering the possibility that it was Licinia who wielded the knife . . ."

"The Virgo Maxima! But for what purpose?"

"To deflect interest from her own impending trial. To take vengeance on the young lovers—assuming they are lovers—because she is insanely jealous of them. Or to protect them, by killing the man sent to spy on them, because she grows more sentimental as she grows older, like myself. Except that her plan failed when the man screamed and the other Vestals came running."

"Deep waters," Rufus agreed. "Can we ever know the truth?"

"In bits and pieces," I said, "and sometimes by looking where we don't expect to find it." I rubbed my eyes and fought to contain a yawn. I closed my eyes—for just an instant, I thought. . . .

I awoke with a start at the touch of a hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Catilina.

"The search . . . ?" I said.

"Fruitless. We looked behind every curtain, under every couch, inside every chamber pot."

I nodded. "Then I'll return to my house now, if Licinia will be kind enough to awaken her litter-bearers and send them to the foot of the stairs. I'll wait on the steps outside." I walked toward the great barred doors in the high foyer. "I suppose this is the only time I shall ever be inside this place, at such an hour of the night. It has been a memorable experience."

"Not too unpleasant, I hope," said Catilina. He lowered his voice. "You'll do what you can for me, yes? Go snooping on my behalf, locate that messenger, uncover what you can about Clodius and his schemes? I don't forget my friends, Gordianus. Sometime in the future I'll repay you."

"Of course," I said, and thought: *If you have a future, Catilina.*

The Vestal who had admitted us came to unbar the door. She kept her eyes averted, especially from Catilina.

As the door swung open, I heard a liquid *plop* from the pond. I smiled at the Vestal. "The frogs are sluggish tonight."

She gave me a weary, irritable look. "There are no frogs in the pond," she said.

The door closed behind me. I heard the bar fall. I walked slowly down the steps. A sudden wind blew through the Forum, carrying the smell of rain. I looked up and saw the stars begin to vanish one by one behind a mantle of black clouds coming from the west.

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Suddenly I realized the truth.

I ran up the steps and beat upon the door, at first softly and then louder. When there was no answer I banged my fist against it and at last began to shout.

The door gave a shudder and opened. I slipped inside. The Vestal frowned at me, confused. Catilina and Fabia stood beside the pool, with Licinia and Rufus nearby. I walked to them quickly, feeling the full strangeness of the starlight, the distant chanting, the atmosphere of sanctity and death within the forbidden walls.

"The murderer is still here, within the house," I said. "Here in our very presence!"

Suspicious glances passed from eye to eye. Licinia stepped back. Even Fabia and Catilina drew apart.

"Do you still have the knives you carried for your search?"

Licinia produced a kitchen knife from the folds of her stola, as did Fabia.

"And you, Rufus?"

He pulled out a short dagger, as did I. Only Catilina was without a weapon.

I walked to the edge of the pool. "When I entered the House of the Vestals, I saw reeds growing from the center of the pool—only from the center. Yet these reeds are very near the edge. Something keeps softly splashing, yet there are no frogs in the pond." I reached over the black water, seized the hollow reeds, and threw them onto the paving stones.

A moment later he emerged from the water, sputtering and choking. He bolted and slipped, struggling against the encumbrance of the sodden woolen cloak that hung on him like a coat of mail. The cloak was black and hooded, like the one his confederate had worn. In the darkness he looked like a monster made of blackness, emerging from a pool of nightmare. Then something swung through space, glittering darkly in the starlight. He staggered toward me, wielding his dagger.

It was Catilina, weaponless, who threw himself on the assassin. The two of them tumbled into the water. Rufus and I stepped into the pool, but amid the foaming chaos it was impossible to strike a blow.

Then the struggle was over, as abruptly as it had begun. Catilina rose onto his hands and knees, water dripping from his beard, his eyes open wide, as if he had surprised even himself with what he had done. The assassin lay writhing in the water, surrounded by an

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effusion that even in the dark water could not be mistaken for anything but blood; the stars reflected in its murk were fiery red.

"Help me pull him from the water," I said. "Quickly, Rufus!"

We dragged the man out of the pool and onto the paving stones. The knife was plunged hilt-deep into his chest. His fingers still gripped the handle. His eyes were open wide. He shuddered and twitched occasionally, but his face—broad-nosed, beetle-browed, shadowed with stubble—was oddly peaceful. The household slaves, alerted by the noise, gathered around. From the Temple of Vesta, the priestesses continued to chant, oblivious.

Like Cicero—like Catilina, I suspect—I am not a particularly religious man. Yet it seems to me that Jupiter himself showed his favor to Catilina at that moment; otherwise, would the assassin have confessed before he died, had not a thin filament of lightning appeared above the tiled roof of the colonnade?

The dying man saw it..His eyes grew wider. Rufus crouched over him and touched his hand where it gripped the pommel of the dagger. "I am an augur," he said, with a tone of authority that far exceeded his years. Despite his shock of red hair, his freckles and bright brown eyes, he did not look at all like a boy to me in that instant. "I read the auspices."

"The lightning . . ." the man groaned.

"On your right-hand side. The hand that grips the dagger in your heart."

"A bad omen? Tell me, augur!"

"The gods have come for you—"

"Oh no!"

"Look where they will find you, in the House of the Vestals, with the blood of the man you murdered still warm. They will be angry—"

A bolt of lightning shattered the horizon. The sky rumbled.

"I have been an impious man! I have offended the gods terribly!"

"Yes, and you had best appease them while you can. Confess what you have done, here in the presence of the Virgo Maxima."

The man convulsed, and I thought he would die then and there. But after a moment he rallied. "Forgive me . . ."

"Why did you come here?"

"I followed Catilina."

"On whose orders?"

"Clodius." ("I knew it!" whispered Catilina.)

"What was your purpose?"

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"We were to follow him into this house, unseen. We were to spy upon him in the Vestal's room. I was to wait until the most compromising moment—except that they never took their clothes off!" He laughed softly, and gasped with pain.

"And then?"

"And then I was to kill Gnaeus."

"The man who came with you?"

"Yes."

"But why?"

"How better to ruin Catilina beyond hope, than to have him caught naked with a Vestal, a corpse, and a bloody dagger? Except that they wouldn't take off their clothes!" He barked out another laugh. Blood ran from the corner of his mouth. "So I went ahead and slit Gnaeus's throat—the poor fool never expected it. Then I was to escape in silence and raise an alarm outside the doors. But I never counted on Gnaeus making so loud a scream! I dropped my knife, as Clodius told me to do, to be sure there was a weapon to incriminate Catilina. I took Gnaeus's knife and ran to the courtyard. Then lamps appeared from everywhere, all held aloft, some of them between me and the door. I remembered a trick my old centurion taught me in the army. I slipped into the pool, as quiet as a water snake, and cut a reed to breathe through. When I came up next to see how things stood, the door had been closed and barred, with a Vestal attending it! I slipped beneath the water again. It's like death beneath the water, staring up at the black sky and so many stars . . ."

Lightning danced all around us, both to the right and the left. With a roar of thunder the sky cracked open above our heads and rain began to fall. The assassin gave a final convulsion, stiffened, and then grew limp.

As all Rome knows, the trials of the Vestals and their alleged paramours ended in their acquittal. Their triumphs were not without irony.

Licinia and Crassus were tried simultaneously. Crassus's defense was novel but effective. His reason for passionately pursuing Licinia, it turned out, was not lust but avarice. It seems that she owned a villa on the outskirts of the city which he was determined to purchase at a bargain. It is a testament to Crassus's reputation for greed that the judges accepted this excuse without question. Crassus was publicly embarrassed and made the butt of jokes for a season,

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but I am told that he went on badgering Licinia until he acquired the property at the price he wanted.

The trials of Fabia and Catilina for iniquity quickly descended into political name-calling. Cicero remained noticeably absent from the proceedings, but some of the most respected orators in Rome spoke in their defense, including Piso, Catulus, and—probably the only man in Rome more notoriously upright and impervious to sexual temptation than Cicero—the young Cato. It was Cato who made such bold insinuations about the machinations of Clodius (unprovable, since the assassins were dead and the murder had been hushed up, but damaging nonetheless) that Clodius found it convenient to flee Rome and spend several months down in Baiae until the furor passed. Afterwards, Cicero privately thanked Cato for defending his sister-in-law's honor. Cato haughtily replied that he did not do it for Fabia, but, like all his public work, for the good of Rome. What a prig!

Catilina was acquitted with the rest. The insistence that he and Fabia were discovered fully dressed weighed heavily in his favor. For my own part, I remain undecided about his guilt or innocence in regard to seducing Fabia. It seems strange to me that he should have spent so much time courting a young woman sworn to chastity, unless his intentions were base; and how did Clodius know that Catilina would respond to a forged note from Fabia, unless he had reason to believe that the two were already lovers? The assassin's repeated lament that they would not take off their clothes might seem, on the surface, to vindicate Catilina and Fabia; but there are a great many things that two people can do while still more or less fully dressed.

Catilina's actions, like his motivations, remain a mystery to me. Only time will tell what sort of character he truly is.

Long after the trials were over, I received an unexpected gift from the Virgo Maxima—a scroll containing the poems of Sappho. My adopted son Eco, seventeen now and a student of Greek, declares it his favorite book, though I am not sure he is quite old enough to appreciate its subtleties. I like to take it from the shelf myself sometimes, especially on long, moonless nights, and read from it softly aloud:

> "The moon is set, and set are
> the Pleiades; and midnight
> Soon; so, and the hour departing:
> And I, on my bed—alone."

That passage in particular makes me think of Licinia in her room in the House of the Vestals. ●

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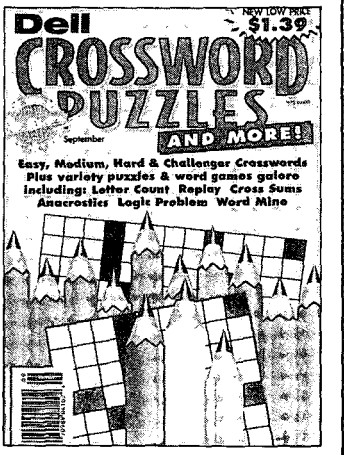

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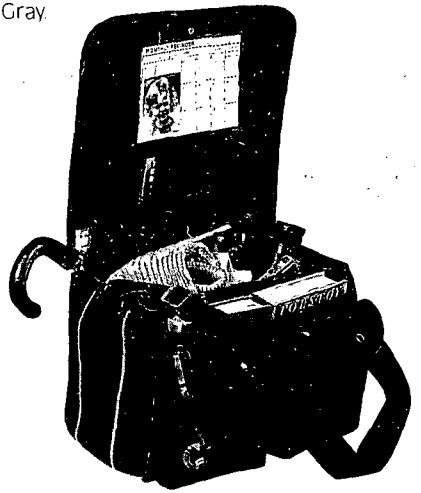

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